

**THE STANZA**

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"Who killed Cock Robin?"  
"I," said the Sparrow,  
"With my bow and arrow,  
I killed Cock Robin."

I'm going to talk about stanzas.

"Who saw him die?"  
"I," said the Fly,  
"With my little eye,  
I saw him die."

More precisely, I'm going to talk about the first three places in which I remember encountering words grouped into regular units, which I then knew as verses, not stanzas. There was a nursery-rhyme, a picture-book, and a carol.

"Who caught his blood?"  
"I," said the Fish,  
"With my little dish,  
I caught his blood."

From each of those three texts I'm going to draw a conclusion – no I'm absolutely not going to draw a conclusion as I'm not in the business of that, I'm going to mount a speculation relating to the stanza in general, draw my bow and shoot an arrow in the air and where it lands, etc.

"Who'll make the shroud?"  
"I," said the Beetle,  
"With my thread and needle,  
I'll make the shroud."

Because when all's said and done, at the end of the day, plus Q and A, a lecture given by a practising writer on his or her craft is always going to be no more nor less than a grand Note to Self, and it is a peculiar effect of the writing life that as we get older a few more interested passers-by cluster over our shoulders to see what's written on our Note to Self and say okay, or not okay, or whatever, and resume what they were doing. Anyway, back to the crime scene.

"Who'll dig his grave?"  
"I," said the Owl,  
"With my spade and trowel,  
I'll dig his grave."

One day, in the poetry festival of the afterlife, we shall hear from the greatest headliner of all, the poet Anonymous. There'll be a long line at his table, he'll have a lot of books to sign.

“Who'll give a damn?”  
“I,” said the Poet,  
“I'll write a poem to show it,  
I'll give a damn.”

*Who Killed Cock-Robin* goes on for about twice the length I've quoted. In fact it never properly ends because like everything in the oral tradition it can be reworked infinitely to narrate whatever's happening, from the death of the god Baldur to the murder of William II in the New Forest, to what sometimes appears to be the traditional function of every nursery-rhyme in every culture ever – taking the piss out of Robert Walpole. Anyway, in my book it had thirteen verses, interspersed with the following refrain:

*All the birds of the air fell a-sighing and a-sobbing  
when they heard the bell toll for poor Cock Robin.*

Which also ends the story. Or, in the world of bedtime, the thud of a hardback book being shut, and darkness and quiet and vague terror and a landing light and merciful sleep end the story.

Anyway, even in death, Cock Robin is not liberated from the chains of rhyme, and, I might add, if Cock Robin had little sense of death, he probably had even less sense of God, but like many an agnostic animal who has followed him into English earth, he evidently wasn't liberated from the liturgy and the light and the murmured Amen either. He is rhymed into eternity with bell and book and trowel.

Even as the infant I was when I encountered this thing, a verse on every page with a picture to go with it – which of course means that a stanza-break can form in one's mind as the delicious turning of a large page – I remember thinking I didn't much care for the refrain. I didn't like refrains anyway in my days of yore, as I was hungry for the story to develop, for the next thing to happen, and blaring out exactly the same recapitulation as my nursery classmates – who might as well be blaring 'Our Father who art in Heaven' or 'Happy Birthday dear Colin' or 'Who wants to play War' – just didn't feel like a valuable use of my resources. As the refrain was trundling by for the fourth or fifth time I probably made something like the 1960s school-playground equivalent of the American sound *yada-yada-yada* to signify something like *I know all this, get on with it*.

Looking back at the poem now, I think the problem with the refrain is not that it's repetitive but that it's not true. I don't mind if 'timor mortis conturbat me' or 'the rain it raineth every day' or 'it's all over now, Baby Blue' come back a thousand times, they are THE CASE – for as Auden writes in 'Bucolics': 'Nothing is lovely, not even in poetry, which is not the case' (*The Shield of Achilles*, W.H. Auden, Faber 1955) – above all the flesh of the poem can do nothing about the bone – but the refrain of *Who Killed Cock-Robin* fails this test.

It is demonstrably *NOT THE CASE* that the birds of the air are a-sighing and a-sobbing. Because, fine, let's be forgiving to the haphazard blur of antiquity and set aside the fact that three of the thirteen 'birds of the air' – I'm looking at you, the Fly, the Fish and the Beetle – were not and have never been birds of the air or of anything else, not even to the Master David Attenboroughs of old English villages. (In defence of the Bull who pulls the tolling bell I should say that this was originally most likely a Bull-*finch*, obviously, as some of you were about to point out, an animal much better suited to bell-ringing.) But of the remaining ten interested creatures, only one could from his or her description be said to be implicitly engaged in 'a-sighing' and/or 'a-sobbing': I refer of course to the Dove, helplessly chained by rhyme to Love, who therefore 'mourns for his love'. Most poems in our history would have elevated this footnote to the status of a main plot, but one simply doesn't argue with the cheery brutality of bygone children.

Of the remaining nine, only the Thrush volunteers something vaguely helpful: he'll sing a psalm, though this gesture feels secondary to the fact that the Thrush happens to be in the area, sitting, obviously, on a bush. For most of the birds of the air their assistance comes with a raft of conditions that, given the context, strikes me as rather insensitive. Either they volunteer skills that are what they do every day – the Bull suggests he will pull because he *can* pull – or they say they'll lend a hand or wing or claw *only if it's on their terms* – the Kite if it's not at night, the Lark if it's not in the dark, and so on – or, worse, they'll help but in their own good time: in this avian race to the bottom the worst offender is the Linnet, who's prepared to carry the Link – in whatever way *that* helps – and will even fetch the Link, but only *in a minute*. Thanks, Linnet, really rose to the occasion there. On the back of all this bargaining and prevaricating the refrain 'All the birds of the air fell a-sighing and a-sobbing/When they heard the bell toll for poor Cock Robin' rings pretty hollow to me. The whole thing seems riddled with cant and convenience, maybe it really *is* about politicians.

There's not a lot of Big Society going on there. There never is if you have to ask. Then again, give or take their unlikely skills and surprising possessions, the Fish with a dish, the Rook with a book, not least the Sparrow with a Bow-and-Arrow

(objection your honour, unproven, objection sustained), all they're really doing is what animals do when one of them dies, which is more or less nothing – though, true, I've heard that ravens stand around in solemn silence and elephants gently nudge the bones to some special place – but on the whole, this is a poem about making a song and dance of something about which songs and dances are never made. Whatever genius thought this thing up, he or she knew that a creature is *different from a different creature*: not a little bit different, but wholeheartedly *not the same*. Again, to quote Auden on the insects: 'They are not with us.' A different thing *does things differently*, it does them to its utmost, it doesn't have an attitude to them, nor care what yours is. It doesn't understand dying unless it comes by way of killing.

What these odd little rhymes are also doing is teaching us – or they once upon a time taught me – that words that sound like each other *do* something to each other, they cluster and herd and flock and hold together somewhere where they generate heat, and that somewhere, that nest or den or sett or burrow, is called a verse, or, ten years later, a stanza. Having grown out of baby language by the time I encountered nursery-rhymes, I was still some years shy of the advanced baby language of prosody, and so was unaware that these stanzas were rhymed ABBA as opposed to ABABAB or ABCBCA or DBDBD etc, and that this particular rhyme-scheme, ABBA, serves to emphasize the vivid isolation of any living thing. The symmetry of the rhymes lets the thing nestle where it is, *within how it is*, girded against the cold. The more foregrounded the form of a stanza, in general, the starker the silence that resonates with its imprint. What's wrong with formless verse is that it leaves no trace on silence.

*To whit* – if I might quote one of the birds of the air – *to whit*: the Cold here, or Silence, is an unanswered question, and where the Silence meets the creature that question is generated: WHO DID THIS – which, if you recall, is what the Silence asks the Creature in Genesis 3:11 – *And he said, Who told thee, that thou wast naked? Hast thou eaten of the tree, whereof I commanded thee, that thou shouldest not eate?* – the question is essentially WHO DID THIS – then later: WHO WILL DO THIS? – which the Silence has been asking Creatures ever since, at least any Creatures who believe the Silence is a Being of some kind – and the Silence is thus answered in two ways, first about what happened:

*I did that  
Because I'm made like this  
I did that*

And then about what's going to:

*I'll do that*

*Because I'm made like this  
I'll do that*

It would of course take a Gerard Manley Hopkins to write a verse for the Kingfisher, perhaps in reply to the question 'Who'll catch the fire?'

*Each mortal thing does one thing and the same:  
Deals out that being indoors each one dwells;  
Selves — goes itself; myself it speaks and spells,  
Crying What I dó is me: for that I came.*

'As kingfishers catch fire, dragonflies draw flame', Gerard Manley Hopkins

ABBA, btw. QED. Halcyon days indeed.

*Who Killed Cock-Robin?* is probably English literature's first – and arguably its worst – whodunit. Even an episode of *Midsomer Murders* – into which 'The Case of The Slaughtered Songbird' would have fitted rather sweetly – isn't solved in eight words. Ten, twenty maybe. I re-familiarize you with this poem/song/nursery-rhyme simply because it's the first time I, myself, speaking and spelling, consciously encountered life – in the form of English words *about* life – being gathered into patterned shapes on a page.

Those of you who have encountered eight, nine or ten words of my own on the subject of poetry will know that I'm interested in white space, in what happens beyond lines and between stanzas, or rather what the words *make happen in the mind*. I'm interested in what pressure black puts on white and white puts on black. Perhaps, in our craft, this is where light and time bend for us, like they seem to on a daily basis for physicists and astronomers. I wasn't interested in any of that when I first heard or was read or read *Who Killed Cock-Robin?* but as the earliest recoverable impact on that part of my brain that hears things and sings songs, it perhaps merits a brief illuminating look – not at what's in the stanzas, but what's outside them...

White space makes a poem. Once prose starts employing white space for anything other than reasons of clarity or clearing its throat, it is starting to become a poem. To raid the creatures of the air again, a chrysalis just hangs there taking half the space, but a butterfly simply *is* half-space. Earth may make it what it is, but air makes it *how* it is. And what makes a poem stanzaic is orchestrated white space. Who's orchestrating it? Well, the poet – with her blind little eye – is orchestrating it. In the best poems the blind eye is at least as good as the good eye.

In my book about poetry I said that it might sometimes be a useful visual strategy to reverse the colours of a poem on the page to their *Negative*, that is, white writing on black, so as more keenly to apprehend the sense of fire-in-the-night vulnerability of the ink or pixels, and you're-alone-in-the-universe gloom of the screen or page. I want to take this concept forwards, but first, a digression.

I'm often asked by students how certain concepts relating to literary verse (in the sense of verse that's read from a page or screen) can be profitably considered in terms of performance poetry. Well, imho, in my humble opinion, this white-and-black concept can illustrate what's bad about performance poetry when it's bad, and – from time to time – good when it's good. What is the nature or quality of the silence in a performed poem? What is its tonality? Does it have coherence? Is it anything other than gaps for oxygen or effect?

A child stops to sob in a tantrum, a politician pauses *within* sentences (never between them, so no one will interrupt), or a gloomy doctor relishes the unanswerable power of her pronouncements. Those spaces are natural, organic to the age or profession or dispensation of humours in the speaker. Can a poet performing a poem, either in his/her voice *or* a dramatic monologue – achieve that? Characterize the silence? Enfold, engross, *include* the silence, as the form or white space is vital in the best written poems? I think that when performance poetry is not successful, it's this that's failing. Without *character* the silence is for *what*? For us to think what exactly – oh that's a clever rhyme, that's skilfully delivered, that's just like what *I* think! What a good heart in the right place! be it over and over again the same right place.

So take the white silence of a performance poem and stand *that* up, as it were, next to the stand-up words. Is the quiet a creature too? Has that got brain and heart and soul or it just taking my time and money?

But let's return to the page and, indeed, to long ago, or at least my long ago, which, one realizes when one re-encounters nursery-rhymes, is psychologically the same thing. My school playground is the one in Brueghel, the one in L.S. Lowry, the one to which children go unwillingly as snails towards, as in *As You Like It*, the one where these rhymes were first dreamed up by children forming circles, while Peter and Iona Opie stood in the trees with a tape recorder, salvaging it all. I was there, don't you remember? I hope that I long ago grew out of that infant solipsism – how do I know there was a world before I came? – but our dreams remind us it's not in our power willfully to grow out of anything. And the throat by which the songs rise up is a well struck to the wellspring of the language, whenever that was, however it came. And, while I'm standing by the school building, is it not possible that the division of school days into periods, gay

or grim, might make a poet think in stanzas? Or indeed want to see the back of 'em forever?

Along with my memories of *Who Killed Cock-Robin?* I have two other strong visual recollections of encountering the stanzaic. Both these texts have left their mark, which makes them relevant now, even if it's just in the spirit of the birds of the air, impostors and all:

*I'll do that  
Because I'm made like this  
I'll do that*

The first is singing hymns from a hymn-book. We Maxwells were regular churchgoers, in the sense of regularly going to church once a year, a week before Christmas to hear a few carols. So I don't even mean hymns from a hymn-book, I mean carols from a carol-sheet. Hymns I got to when people started dying and getting married.

Lord my God! When I in awesome wonder  
Consider all the works thy hand hath made,  
I see the stars, I hear the mighty thunder,  
Thy power throughout the universe displayed.

Then sings my soul, my Saviour God, to Thee,  
How great Thou art, how great Thou art!  
Then sings my soul, my Saviour God, to Thee,  
How great Thou art, how great Thou art!

That's the first verse and refrain of 'How Great Thou Art', which, as it happens, is Number One in the *Songs of Praise* Hymn Parade as voted for by you the public, the top five being rounded out by 'In Christ Alone', 'Be Still, For the Presence of the Lord', 'Dear Lord and Father of Mankind', and 'Here I am, Lord.' Mostly quatrains rhyming ABAB, and all about the same thing. So basically slow pop music without the girl.

Only you had to comb your hair and stand up to sing them. And just when you thought you'd mastered the tune it went somewhere weird and you could be heard being wrong. Or some angelic show-off nearby would know a soaring or swooping descant part, which indicated they came to this thing more often and knew God better than you did. You all sat down when the thing was done and had to behave, though there wasn't really anyone making you. There were numbers on the wall, maybe half-time scores from other religions. The hymn books were old, blue, and tattered, they'd been published during the Bible. At

the back of the book there were membrane-thin pages bearing tiny musical scores, the first and only place I ever encountered a *breve*, not a semi-breve, which was the longest unit of time I'd encountered at that age, but a complete and utter *breve*, a note you had to hold for a whole morning. Like the semi-breve it's an egg-shaped bud without a stalk of any kind, but a breve has got twin strokes on either side of it, almost like crutches, so it's a semi-breve in old age.

These rituals and oddities of the hymn-book and the house in which we sang gave the gaps between the verses a significant weight. So much so that on one occasion a little playmate of ours, at the age of five or six, staring at the vicar as he got us to rise again or be seated again, wondered loudly: 'Is that man God?' Though I was glad *I* hadn't asked that, I was glad somebody had, if just for clarification. But the gaps *were*, to my mind, God's, they were a silence in his strange stone domain. The sound between them was *Have You Done This? Have You Been This? Will You Do This? Will You Be This? Let This Be Done*. I think I fled when they were all in mid-breve.

If we play my Negative game and make the silence the black, *make the silence what we're hearing*, then the little verses tremulously sung by variously believing vaguely harmonious singers are holes in the silence, whose voices are formed in the silence and *by* it, made tremulous, made believing, made harmonious.

Think about the figures at Pompeii: they were the solid thing, the dark imprint, for a short lifetime, then they died and decayed and were nothing for nineteen centuries – holes, gaps, spaces – then Giuseppe Fiorelli came along with his injections of plaster and made them solid forms again. For our time here we shall mostly be white space, line-break or stanza-break. But the silence around hymns or carols has a distinct and formidable power that centuries of our cultural history have bestowed upon it, so it's to there we go for our investigation, to stand beneath and sound the depth of a space that is *not the voice, not the song, not the poem*.

For here's a man who did not flee from church, but sang that breve to its utmost. Here is, or here are, George Herbert's 'Easter Wings', and this first reading is a reading of the sound alone:

Lord, who createdst man in wealth and store,  
Though foolishly he lost the same,  
Decaying more and more  
Till he became  
Most poor:  
With thee

O let me rise  
As larks, harmoniously,  
And sing this day thy victories:  
Then shall the fall further the flight in me.

My tender age in sorrow did begin;  
And still with sicknesses and shame  
Thou didst so punish sin,  
That I became  
Most thin.  
With thee  
Let me combine,  
And feel this day thy victory;  
For, if I imp my wing on thine,  
Affliction shall advance the flight in me.

As you can see, it's a pictorial poem, they look like wings, and so on. Which is great, but that's about the black, and I'm talking about the white. If you mist your eyes until the stanzas are nothing *but* wings, you can go the further yard and perceive the whiteness as – well, perhaps two tides coming in over an isthmus of land, or two faces moving towards each other, like the famous optical illusion of the candlestick and the lovers. (By the way, if you say you don't see black-on-white but blue-on-gold, then I'm going back to London.)

So you can characterize the whiteness visually, and because Herbert is apostrophizing the Deity, the characterization is as clear as can be. (Though I'm reminded of something Bono said about Bob Dylan's religious songs – that in the best ones the *You* being addressed makes perfect sense both as God *and* a lover.) But see how utterance and silence work together here: the first quarter of the poem, the thinning, is the decay of man to its most abject point. By extension, as the voice of man withers, the sense of God is amplified, and on the shortest lines, the hinge, 'Most poor: / With thee', the Voice begins to be borne up by the Sense, the phrases 'O let me rise' and 'Let me combine' seem to be pushing outward at the space as the Voice widens and grows towards a realm of hopefulness.

Then precisely the same happens again, but with Herbert himself as the individual lost soul salvaged at the heart by 'most thin. / With thee'. Where the line is long at the beginning, it is space taken by mankind or by a man, to the exclusion of the divine, and the pride of this makes it sicken and shorten. Where it is short it is saved, the divine being *being* all around it, and so it grows to amplitude having drawn strength from God, or – for a bewildered poet of nowadays – having *drawn* sound from silence. When the line is long again it is – in Christian terms – a

saved line. The soul has decayed, found salvation, grown wings. And there they are before you. Along with Herbert's poem shapes like wings, there is, as it were, God's un-poem shaped like what wings fly in.

We can find this divine silence pressing in on another great religious poet – Hopkins – for 'Pied Beauty' seems set fair to be a sonnet of some kind, rhyming as it does ABCABC then DBCD then suddenly the B is skipped (the last B having petered out in the querulous parenthesis 'who knows how?') and the final D is simply two words. What we have is a 13-line poem with a last line that almost vanishes. It's as if, to this poet, the beauty of the white space simply overcomes the black voice and leaves it, literally, lost for words:

Glory be to God for dappled things –  
    For skies of couple-colour as a brindled cow;  
        For rose-moles all in stipple upon trout that swim;  
Fresh-firecoal chestnut-falls; finches' wings;  
    Landscape plotted and pieced – fold, fallow, and plough;  
    And áll trádes, their gear and tackle and trim.

All things counter, original, spare, strange;  
    Whatever is fickle, freckled (who knows how?)  
        With swift, slow; sweet, sour; adazzle, dim;  
He fathers-forth whose beauty is past change:  
    Praise him.

It's hard not to look at it without feeling the force Hopkins is feeling – not perhaps spiritual in your case or mine, but *something* is moving, right there before you, and it reminds us that on entering the novitiate Hopkins burned every poem he had. In religious poems perhaps we're most likely to encounter that rare thing, a poet who accords silence a power that's equal to, or greater than, the respect he accords his scribblings.

Well – what if our readings could somehow sound that? Perhaps for an agnostic to try, to try to, he or she might come as close as will ever be possible to a tangible sense of belief, or at least the feel of it, as Wordsworth might say, 'along the heart'. What one is sounding is a presence at the border between the black and white of the page, the sound and silence of the air. Let me try to sound the white space, the tide washing in over the vanishing strip of land, feel its force, give way to it, be borne up and amplified by it. Remember, these are the words of a poet who believes there's something, in the voice of a poet who believes there's nothing. Well, something's at work here somewhere, so let's light the taper anyway. This second reading is a reading of both the sound *and* the silence.

Lord, who createdst man in wealth and store,  
Though foolishly he lost the same,  
Decaying more and more  
Till he became  
Most poor:  
With thee  
O let me rise  
As larks, harmoniously,  
And sing this day thy victories:  
Then shall the fall further the flight in me.

My tender age in sorrow did begin;  
And still with sicknesses and shame  
Thou didst so punish sin,  
That I became  
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Let me combine,  
And feel this day thy victory;  
For, if I imp my wing on thine,  
Affliction shall advance the flight in me.

Which once again, is my cue to flee the church in mid-breve, but the whiteness can't be fled from. Here then is a short poem of mine, in fact the very latest, in which for once, the whiteness has its say:

May I say that when I meet you in the morning  
and you infer from silence that there's nothing  
you can't say,  
one thing I'm also saying is there's nothing  
you can do.

May I say that when I meet you in my brightness,  
you in a ragged gown to do your business,  
it's not I  
who presses it from you *do I look restless*  
only you.

Only you you drag from what you dream of  
to pen your variation on the theme of  
how you are  
this morning. May I say I had a dream of  
something too?

Obviously not and off you go now.  
Left your little footprint let it snow now  
let it snow  
and you can dream I wonder where you go now,  
can't you.

'The Whiteness Speaks', Glyn Maxwell

My third Royal and Ancient recollection of stanza-form is, again, a picture-book, but it must have been later, it had more words to the page. Animals again, but dealing with something a bit more serious than the motiveless murder of one garden bird by another. In this book I found animals dealing with an old human creature who's building an enormous boat and reckons they should all get on it before the rain comes down and washes the world away.

Why this book stayed with me so forcefully is that when the animals began to go in, two by two, they went in alphabetically. So that when the pairs of Aardvarks, Ants and Antelopes filed up the gangway there wasn't a cloud in the sky, and it was pretty pleasant too for the Bears, Cats, Dogs and Elephants. It was a nice but cloudy day when the Hedgehogs and Kingfishers got on board, and even the Linnets had time to say hang on they'd be there in a few minutes. But as the pages turned, the clouds grew darker and it was drizzling by the time the Penguins waddled up, raining hard on the Rabbits and Raccoons, pissing down for real on the Snakes and Spiders... And so on, the sky black, the rain torrential, time running out. Then the thud of the hardback book again and God help the Zebras. This, for those who read me, obviously found its way into my long poem 'Out of the Rain' – so what is it? A sense that the monstrously arbitrary fixed forms of language would determine the fate of innocent creatures?

Perhaps it's more that the sense of ending – in this case that of the alphabet, for the afore-mentioned poem was above all a teaching material – invests the language with a most vivid sense of foreboding, that the end of the alphabet, line, poem, book, is coming. Here's what the 24-year-old Keats said about feeling his death was near: 'How astonishingly does the chance of leaving the world impress a sense of its natural beauties on us.' He mentions Falstaff, 'babbling of green fields' as the end approaches. Poetry can replicate that process in its forms – it replicates every process in its forms, if you think about it. I don't mean 'if you think about it', I mean *if you think about it*.

Anyway, remembering the Noah's Flood book made me think of a poem that struck me as having a notably eccentric and suggestive stanza form – *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, written once again by Anonymous, under his pseudonym

‘the Gawain-poet’, and here in the translation by Simon Armitage. If you look at the stanza form – main body, little bob-and-wheel – there’s actually something you can notice with the old misting of the eyes *before* you conceive that it’s alliterative in the main body and then both rhymed and alliterative in the bob-and-wheel. It’s that while the bob-and-wheel stays fixed in every stanza, the bob being one short stress, and the wheel four trimeters, the five lines rhyming ABABA, the main body of the stanza, the alliterative unrhymed narrative, oscillates wildly in length: across the first five stanzas it’s 14 lines, then 12, then 18, then 20, then 17. At one point a 13 is followed by a 24.

To my mind, or to my ear, this has a highly resonant impact. The listener cottons on quickly to the concept that each section of narrative, whatever it’s talking about, wherever we are in the story, will culminate quite abruptly with this thumping authoritative coda, and – AND – you will never quite know when it’s coming. There is a qualitative difference between long lines and short too: the bob-and-wheel has a tendency to sum up, set down, say *this is where we’re up to*. In stanza one, after the roll-up gather-round historical details – Troy, Aeneas, Romulus, Brutus – we get something like *AND SO*:

And further afield, over the Sea of France,  
on Britain’s broad hill-tops, Felix Brutus made  
his stand.

And wonder, dread and war  
have lingered in that land  
where loss and love in turn  
have held the upper hand.

*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Anonymous, trans. Simon Armitage (Faber 2009)

It’s taking a long look in a short form. A fan of HBO box-sets might be hearing the phrase ‘Previously in world history...’ The picture seems to freeze into a map or tableau of what’s happened so far, and here we are right now. In the fifth stanza an account of Yuletide tradition at Camelot, busy with detail, arrives suddenly at a frozen picture: again, *this is where we’re up to*:

Within Camelot’s castle this was the custom,  
at feasts and festivals when the fellowship  
would meet.

With features proud and fine  
he stood there tall and straight,  
a king at Christmas time  
amid great merriment.

The way the Gawain-poet plays the key-signature of his alliterative line against that of his rhymed lines is a striking feature of the poem. It makes close-ups, it makes jump-cuts, it turns the head. He also reaps a joyous harvest by shifting from past tense to present tense and back again. Here's Gawain trying to puzzle out why the beautiful lady of the castle has just mysteriously climbed into his bed in the middle of the night. Listen to the tense shift from past to present – day has passed and now she's present, as it were – and watch what it does:

Yet he said to himself, 'Instead of this stealth  
I should ask openly what her actions imply.'  
So he stirred and stretched, turned on his side,  
lifted his eyelids and, looking alarmed,  
signed himself hurriedly with this hand, as if saving  
his life.

Her chin is pale, her cheeks  
are ruddy red with health;  
her smile is sweet, she speaks  
with lips which love to laugh...

This is how poets made film before there was film. I've started trying this out in poetry and prose and it's like being given a whole new colour.

But to return to what I saw first, or heard first – uncertainty of length coupled with certainty of outcome. Whatever the story, whoever the protagonist, the bob-and-wheel is coming, it will stop you, freeze you, go five short lines, then this stanza is over. Certain of the end, uncertain when it comes. That could be life and death, but it could also be sex and climax, it rather depends on whether you see black and blue or white and gold.

So, what if those who reject formality in poetry and those who repose too much faith in it are missing the point to an even greater extent than I first thought?

I remember being struck a long time ago how often some of the best-loved poems of major poets were formally unusual – or rather unusually unformal – for that poet. Auden's 'Musée des Beaux-Arts' is unusually loose in construction for him, as is Larkin's 'Days', but the relevant example here is this:

The sea is calm tonight.  
The tide is full, the moon lies fair  
Upon the straits; on the French coast the light  
Gleams and is gone; the cliffs of England stand,  
Glimmering and vast, out in the tranquil bay.  
Come to the window, sweet is the night-air!

Only, from the long line of spray  
Where the sea meets the moon-blanch'd land,  
Listen! you hear the grating roar  
Of pebbles which the waves draw back, and fling,  
At their return, up the high strand,  
Begin, and cease, and then again begin,  
With tremulous cadence slow, and bring  
The eternal note of sadness in.

Sophocles long ago  
Heard it on the Ægean, and it brought  
Into his mind the turbid ebb and flow  
Of human misery; we  
Find also in the sound a thought,  
Hearing it by this distant northern sea.

The Sea of Faith  
Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore  
Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled.  
But now I only hear  
Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,  
Retreating, to the breath  
Of the night-wind, down the vast edges drear  
And naked shingles of the world.

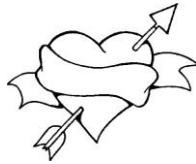
Ah, love, let us be true  
To one another! for the world, which seems  
To lie before us like a land of dreams,  
So various, so beautiful, so new,  
Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,  
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;  
And we are here as on a darkling plain  
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,  
Where ignorant armies clash by night.

Matthew Arnold's 'Dover Beach' has some of the loveliest white space in English poetry. In the first break the heartbreaking sound of the distant tide sends the poet into his learning; the second silence leads him from the world then to the world now; and the third brings him home from despair at that to the little consolation of personal happiness. Not all of Arnold is formally regular, but the great part of it is. Here the sound of the waves breaking, and the sensation of thought arising, combine to shorten lines unexpectedly, and temper the Victorian instinct for high decorous pattern.

As in *Gawain*, we know the stanza will end, the voice give out, the silence overwhelm it, but we don't quite know when, so that the poem has all the creaturely correspondences form can bring – breath, heartbeat, footsteps and so on – but along with those a forlorn, even tragic, extension of voice into nothingness, battling with its truncation *by* nothingness. The thought itself as a stay of execution.

I'm sure many poets write irregular stanzas because they want to, and good luck to them. But I feel that this here appreciation of the stanza, this delving into the personal history I've shared with it, has led me to discover *new grounds* for those irregularities. Mournful, meaningful ground to stand on.

One last word on the word – *stanza* – it *sounds* suspiciously like something a bowman might hear at some point during the process of stringing a bow – *stanza* – and yet I can only repeat that it was not I who killed Cock-Robin, officer, it was the Sparrow, because he rhymes with the murder-weapon, and that, in my line of business, is a fair cop.



## Acknowledgements

*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Anonymous, trans. Simon Armitage (Faber 2009)

'Who Killed Cock Robin?', Anonymous

*Genesis* 3.11, King James Bible

'Dover Beach', Matthew Arnold

'Plains', from '*Bucolics*', *The Shield of Achilles*, W.H. Auden, Faber 1955

'How Great Thou Art', Carl Gustav Boberg

'Easter Wings', George Herbert

'As kingfishers catch fire, dragonflies draw flame' and 'Pied Beauty', Gerard Manley Hopkins

'The Whiteness Speaks', Glyn Maxwell

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