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Introduction

NEW MINDS, NEW LINES

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In a short letter to Kenneth Burke from November 1945, William Carlos Williams thanks his friend for his hospitality on a recent visit and proceeds to reflect on one particularly meaningful exchange: “I liked your manner of explanation when you lowered your voice and spoke of the elementals that interest us both, the humane particulars of realization and communication” (East 88). Such thoughts made it into his half-remembered dreams, for he continues: “I woke in the night with a half-sentence on my metaphorical lips: ‘the limitations of form.’ It seemed to mean something of importance.” Burke, in his response dated a few days later, suggests that the substance of Williams’s formal concern reminds him of their discussions from the 1920s, which, he writes, “were always about ‘form,’ though God only knows what we meant by it” (90).

The limitations of form must have been particularly pressing for Williams near the end of 1945, just three months after Hiroshima and one month into the Nuremberg trials. Narratives of twentieth-century American poetry often describe a highly aestheticized and experimental 1920s giving way to a more socially engaged posture in the 30s and 40s as artists responded to economic depression and world war. An oversimplification to be sure, but a useful one when we consider how this apparent divide between the art of the 20s and 30s establishes the contours of the durable struggle that we see reflected in the Williams-Burke exchange, and that the most significant works of art since then engage: how to move from word to world, from poetics to politics, and from the limitations of form to life itself. Then, as now, a strong commitment to form persisted despite, against, and alongside multiple crises that remind us constantly—even in the

middle of the night in half-remembered dreams—of form’s limitations in light of what Wallace Stevens called “things as they are” (165).

In the arena of poetry and poetics over the last century, no idea has been more generative, variable, and contentious than the idea of form. And no technical aspect of form has more emphatically sponsored and substantiated this marked formal expansiveness than the line in poetry. But what, exactly, is the line? Should it be defined in strictly prosodic terms? Is there value in identifying certain line-genres as Chris Beyers does in *A History of Free Verse* (2001), or as Allen Grossman attempts more economically in his *Summa Lyrica* (1980)? Or should we instead attend to what Stephen Cushman names the numerous fictions of form—those ways in which American poets since Whitman have tended to “overvalue the formal aspects of their art, investing those aspects with tremendous significance,” resulting in a poetry that “distinguishes itself not only by the unique ways in which it foregrounds signifiers but also by the unique ways in which it promotes the significance of its own formation” (4–5)?

Perhaps all of the above, for these questions suggest a certain lack of conceptual literacy and critical consensus regarding the line that *A Broken Thing* does not seek to correct. Instead, this general disagreement marks out a uniquely charged area of poetic as well as critical concern that reflects what the poetry of the last century is, in some elemental way, *about*. The line, in its many ulterior projections, might be an engine for certain ideals of progress—political, ethical, or otherwise. For some, it touches upon the most fundamental epistemological and ontological questions. One finds it caught up in theories of language, and in the very beginnings and endings of things. Remarkably, the line has become an aesthetic, sociopolitical, and, at times, metaphysical variable even as it remains deeply invested in the formal minutiae of rhythm and metrics, rhyme and sound. More than ever, the line is poetry, the radical against which even alternate and emerging poetic forms that foreground the visual or the auditory, the page or the screen, can be distinguished and understood. Extending Burke’s statement to the present context, the line does indeed seem to mean something of importance, but God only knows what—and how—we mean by it.

So yes, the line is overtaxed; it presumes to do too much, and it knows it. What might seem an overextension, however, suggests a core strength of the line that the essays in *A Broken Thing* collectively embody: its ability to be both critical and self-critical, holding its own elaborate fictions of form at a skeptical, questioning distance. This blend of bold confidence and a self-critical undertow saturates the last century of American poetry. Indeed, the most important American poetry of the twentieth century could be said to display either of the following traits,

and often both simultaneously: a penchant for developing ambitious claims about what formal strategies such as the poetic line can accomplish, and a deeply rooted formal concern about such claims. This concern signals a certain anxiety in the face of such ambitious claims for poetry. But it also suggests a certain persistent care, attention, and commitment.

The seeds of such meta-lyrical reflection can be traced back to poetic self-consciousness itself, which, one could argue, is as old as written poetry. But, for our purposes, a more distinct formal concern, particularly in relation to the line, emerges markedly in romantic poetry, where the pieties and prescriptions of received forms were increasingly challenged and stretched to reflect new social experiences and emerging philosophical paradigms. Consider William Blake's brash pronouncement in his prefatory note for *Jerusalem* (1804). Looking back to John Milton's famous statement on the bondage of rhyme at the start of *Paradise Lost*, Blake writes that his original choice of Miltonic blank verse for his prophetic book "was not only awkward, but as much a bondage as rhyme itself" (300). Pushing beyond blank verse, Blake suggests a looser line in terms that would seem perfectly at home in discussions of contemporary free verse: "I therefore have produced a variety in every line, both of cadences and number of syllables. Every word and every letter is studied and put into its fit place." Manipulating the raised copper on his plate to produce a distinctly bolder script, and including profuse capitals for emphasis on the illuminated page, Blake concludes by forging an integral relationship between formal innovation and national identity, if not political revolution: "Poetry Fetter'd, Fetters the Human Race. Nations are Destroy'd, or Flourish, in proportion as The Poetry Painting and Music, are Destroy'd or Flourish."

In William Wordsworth's *Prelude*, the poet's reflection on the fickleness of muse and mind alike offers a much quieter lesson about the failures of the blank-verse line. After considering the accepted subjects for epic utterance—those stories of quest and combat, both fantastic and historical—Wordsworth attempts to justify the fraught ambition behind his autobiographical epic of the poetic mind. Yearning to connect word and world, to "invent / A tale from my own heart" that might still end in some "philosophic song / Of Truth that cherishes our daily life," Wordsworth's hopes are dashed on the shores of self, on what George Oppen would later call the shipwreck of the singular:

But from this awful burthen I full soon  
Take refuge and beguile myself with trust  
That mellow years will bring a riper mind

And clearer insight. Thus my days are past  
In contradiction; with no skill to part  
Vague longing, haply bred by want of power,  
From paramount impulse not to be withstood,  
A timorous capacity, from prudence,  
From circumspection, infinite delay.  
Humility and modest awe, themselves  
Betray me, serving often for a cloak  
To a more subtle selfishness; that now  
Locks every function up in blank reserve,  
Now dupes me, trusting to an anxious eye  
That with intrusive restlessness beats off  
Simplicity and self-presented truth. (42–43)

One imagines T. S. Eliot's Prufrock here: the infinite delay, the anxious eye/I, the intrusive restlessness. But Wordsworth is not left pinned and wriggling on a public wall, but is rather locked up within the limitations of form. In Wordsworth's "blank reserve," we hear the near-anagram "blank verse," which constrains his poetic desires, leaving him to beat off, via rote counting out of poetic feet, the clarifying force of simplicity and self-evident truth. The formal anxiety here, in its specificity and unease, arrives almost inaudibly next to Blake's confident dismissal of the blank-verse line, but it nevertheless provides a pointed critique of Milton's optimistic description (in the prefatory remark on "The Verse" at the start of *Paradise Lost*) of the blank-verse line, its "sense variously drawn out" across heavily enjambed lines, released from the binds of rhyme (355). Unshackled, however, Wordsworth confronts a different kind of limit: a "subtle selfishness" and a "timorous capacity" that constitute not only a shadowed description of his chosen line—that blank reserve—but also an allegory for his restless state of mind seeking connections with the wider world.

In the context of American poetry, we note an important glimpse of a more socially critical formal concern in Phillis Wheatley's proto-romantic paean to the mind's poetic potential in "On Imagination," likely penned during the 1770s. Extolling the virtues of this welcome captivity, she writes:

Now here, now there, the roving Fancy flies,  
Till some lov'd object strikes her wand'ring eyes,  
Whose silken fetters all the senses bind,  
And soft captivity involves the mind. (65)

Wheatley's troping on the heroic couplet is certainly not innocent. Here, fancy roves freely, and no one owns the personified imagination's beloved objects; silken fetters captivate only mind and sense, not soul and person. The neat couplets explode Alexander Pope's facile notions of a versifying mimesis: her lines are not an icon of action or thought, but instead offer a complex formal reckoning of what it meant for a former slave in a slaveholding society to write in the language and form of the enslaver. This makes her song of praise—her “unequal lay,” as she names it in the poem's last line, again exploiting poetic convention to offer a pointed critique—indelibly elegiac even when most exuberant. Wheatley's subtle interrogation of the heroic couplet and its associations previews the kind of devastatingly self-conscious and insinuating formal intelligence wielded nearly three centuries later by poets such as Gwendolyn Brooks. It is a kind of weeping—to adapt a line from Brooks—with form.

Then we come to Whitman, where so much of this business begins. Midway through “Song of Myself,” Whitman decisively shrugs off formal constraints to make way for his long line and its multitudinous contradictions: “To be in any form, what is that? [ . . . ] Mine is no callous shell” (215). And yet not so decisively: for isn't there some quiet nostalgia in the trotting iambic perfection of the first clause—“To be in any form”—and also some deep conflict in the statement if we press on in its clear echoes of Hamlet's indecision? And if form, in terms of a measured metrics, appears only sporadically (though always in a charged, if disguised, way) in Whitman's work, it returns explosively as a political and metaphysical variable in his long-lined synthetic chants of “Form, Union, Plan” (246). Throughout his work, Whitman models the expansiveness of formal ideas that would influence so many future poets, even as he offers a glimpse—particularly in the contracted and increasingly metrical forms that his late work takes—of the inventive endurance of traditional verse forms.

When Whitman asks what it is to be—to write, to exist—in any form, he inadvertently poses a question that would consume both poets and critics of poetry for the next century and beyond. Even as form pulled away from its traditional metrical and generic connotations, and even as poets began to think more rigorously about their work in relation to extra-aesthetic or extra-technical concerns, ideas of form began to take precedence. Though criticism of twentieth-century poetry by default addresses certain facets of this phenomenon, the critical narratives that emerge too often inhabit a partisan sense of formal efficacy that merely retraces the steps of stock narratives involving either the value or vacuousness of so-called innovative and traditional poetics relative to their supposed ideals, political or otherwise. Rather than join the fray, the present introduction aims

to explore the integrity and complexity of this development itself—in particular relation to the line in poetry—and to direct attention to a rich and varied formal concern that remains just as pressing in the twenty-first century.

No single poet could ever exhaust the varied sources of the line or approximate the unique expression it achieves in each poet, in each poem. From Chinese ideograms to Mayan hieroglyphs, from abstract sculpture to cubist collage, from serial music to jazz, from the open field to fractal amplifications, from physiology of the body to the stress of inner thought, and from organic visions of nature to the functions of machine and code, the line in poetry has multiple, intersecting origins and inspirations. If one thing defines how poets approach the line, it is this very acquisitiveness and curiosity. Though one could turn to any number of modernist poets to examine their idiosyncratic fictions of form, William Carlos Williams's obsession with *measure* makes him a seminal figure for thinking about the line. His presence hovers both explicitly and implicitly over the essays in this collection as a model theorizer, idealizer, and self-conscious scrutinizer of the line.

In *Book II* (1946) of Williams's *Paterson*, the poet emerges into the eponymous city's streets in an effort to connect with the life and language of its inhabitants. An internal voice, however, keeps the poet locked in his own mind, stifling his desired engagement with the world:

Outside

outside myself

there is a world,

he rumbled, subject to my incursions. (43)

The first three lines here—a preview of the famous triadic line in which Williams would invest such hope—formally enact through their spacing a sense of expansive connection and release. But the fourth line, snapped back close to the left margin, forces a retreat as the poet moves from the world outside to the world inside: the mind's anxieties, its divided consciousness, its doubt, finally, that the triadic line can induce a true transformation. Those three steps threaten to become *merely* formal. Yet this crisis of form—this finely orchestrated breakdown of Williams's formal ambition—while it might seem to indicate a failure, invites the reader to imagine the difficulties of emerging humanly and authentically into a world marked by class divisions and scarred by war.

Or take this more explicit reflection on what is at stake in thinking about the line later in *Book II*:

Without invention nothing is well spaced,  
unless the mind change, unless  
the stars are new measured, according  
to their relative positions, the  
line will not change, the necessity  
will not matriculate: unless there is  
a new mind there cannot be a new  
line, the old will go on  
repeating itself with recurring  
deadliness: without invention  
nothing lies under the witch-hazel  
bush, the alder does not grow from among  
the hummocks margining the all  
but spent channel of the old swale,  
the small foot-prints  
of the mice under the overhanging  
tufts of the bunch-grass will not  
appear: without invention the line  
will never again take on its ancient  
divisions when the word, a supple word,  
lived in it, crumbled now to chalk. (50)

This brief passage contains not only a theory of the line, but a theory of poetry. The business of stars being new measured according to relative positions suggests the profound implications that Williams sensed in Albert Einstein's theory of relativity—not only poetic, but moral and intellectual as well. Williams submits that we need (if we catch the echoing stellar pun) a new *a-line*-ment, a new measure. The argument, then, seems clear: if we can make it new, if we can invent, we can progress. The line in poetry must reflect—and reflect upon—those changes if it is to maintain any connection to things as they are. It is an indelible statement on the various potentialities of the line, and one that seems as relevant as ever.

But they remain, inevitably, potentialities—everywhere qualified by the conditional and hedged in *via negativa*: “without,” “nothing,” “unless,” “cannot.” Against the rigorously projective and forward-looking aspects of this passage,

Williams offers a kind of reverse dialectic: from making it new (invention, a new mind), to making it romantic/pastoral (nature's witch-hazel, the burgeoning alder), to making it, in a word, "ancient." Why does Williams care what lies under the witch-hazel, a plant whose supposedly magical and healing properties are well documented in folk lore? What does it mean to suggest that invention might "take on" the "ancient divisions" and return to some primal state of the "supple word," where idea and thing, perhaps, were one? Don't these reversions to the past and to superstition lead only to that marked "deadliness"—one can't help but see and hear *dead lines*—of the old repeating itself over and over? The old and the ancient, the myth and the magic, it seems, carry on uneasily with the new, are even revived in and through the new. Williams's forward-looking idealism is thus highly tempered and qualified, a sense enacted in miniature by certain lines read in isolation as a singular integer of meaning: "a new mind there cannot be a new." And yet there must be.

This anxious concern runs through Williams's prose as well, a medium he liked to think of as his laboratory for poetics. In his 1939 essay "Against the Weather: A Study of the Artist," Williams offers a series of questions as to what the artist is, and what he or she should do, before suddenly breaking off and inserting the following: "I've been writing a sentence, with all the art I can muster. Here it is: A work of art is important only as evidence, in its structure, of a new world which it has been created to affirm" (*Selected Essays* 196). A few years later, he would write, "What we are trying to do is not only to disengage the elements of a measure but to seek . . . a new measure or a new way of measuring that will be commensurate with the social, economic world in which we are living" (283). The poem, it seems, must be both world-creating and world-reflecting, all the while (looking back to the passage from *Paterson* above) calling back to its ancient roots. These are the kind of hyperbolic—one might say romantic—contradictions for which Williams is well known. This is what gives his poetry such a rich cognitive congestion, though one should also note a more problematic dissonance that emerges in the condescending awkwardness with which he handles gender, class, and race relations throughout his work. This gap between ideals and reality leads, more often than not, to a charged incommensurability, magnifying the distance between the poet and his ideals on the one hand, and the person he is and the world in which he lives on the other. His work, his lines, show the strain of a formal commitment constantly grating against its limitations. In this broad sense, he is our contemporary.

Williams, in the words we borrow for the epigraph to *A Broken Thing*, writes that "a poem is tough by no quality it borrows from a logical recital of events



nor from the events themselves but solely from that attenuated power which draws perhaps many broken things into a dance giving them thus a full being” (*Imaginations* 16–17). A stunning description of the problems and possibilities inherent in the making of a poem, Williams’s statement also suggests a model for the myriad micro-essays assembled here—these variously informal, dynamic, suggestive, partial, broken things that we have brought into a kind of critical and poetic dance. One cannot offer a cold history of the line, treating its many pasts and multiplying presents as so many instances of poetic thought or signposts of a historical moment. Rather, we must be open to the ways that lines continue to hold us and claim us in some curious way that cannot, and should not, be exorcized or explained away. A poem lies somewhere between a determined now and an open future. This capacity to stretch beyond the extant makes poems such a difficult and necessary pleasure—this blank reserve, this attenuated power, this complex allegory of a present shaded by the past, and shading into something else still. Lines do not mean solely in their brevity or their length, in their becoming or their brokenness; lines live in and through the descriptions we give them. Now, I want to honor these descriptions by offering an overview of the debates that have emerged around poetic lines. Indeed, the history of American poetry in the twentieth century could be told by the compounding, and often confounding, discussions of its lines. *A Broken Thing* extends this history, charting a rich diffusion of theory and practice into the twenty-first century with the most diverse, wide-ranging, and engaging set of essays on the line in poetry to date.

With free verse as we currently understand it over a century old, the thought of compounding discussions about new lines has elicited some sensible skepticism. Ed Dorn, in an interview from the late 70s, discusses the “constant and chronic exacerbation about the legitimacy of the line,” the justification for which he found overdone in an era that had witnessed the “passing of strict meter” (92). As for the perennial question of the line, he declares that “the only thing we can hope for is that it will just die of old age as a question.”

Well, it may have matured, but it certainly hasn’t died. The decade following this interview witnessed two of Denise Levertov’s seminal essays on the line from 1979 (“On the Function of the Line” and “Technique and Tune-up”), as well as three separate publications taking up the topic: *A Field Guide to Contemporary Poetry and Poetics* (1980, revised 1997) included a symposium on the line, as did the literary journal *Epoch* during the same year, and a special free-verse issue of the *Ohio Review* from 1982 contained much pointed back-and-forth about the

line. A more theoretically informed and critical set of responses to these mainstream reflections on the line appeared in *The Line in Postmodern Poetry* (1988). Sponsored both by the academic and aesthetic sea change accompanying the rise of what Mark McGurl has recently dubbed *The Program Era* (2009), and by the genuine integrity and complexity of the topic itself, these varied reflections on line trace the contours of the most fundamental debates in the arena of poetry and poetics from the 50s to the 80s. Before concluding with a rough sketch of the nearly seventy contributions to the present collection, it is important to gauge how this new set of essays, arriving nearly a quarter century after the most recent concerted set of reflections on the line, extends and revises the concerns of these prior reflections.

Field's "The Poetic Line: A Symposium" begins with Sandra McPherson's response to a piece Hayden Carruth published in the *Hudson Review*, and the essays that follow loosely track the rather limited contours of that debate with responses from seven additional poets. The catalyst for these essays was Carruth's craggy dismissal of two poems by Charles Simic and John Haines, which he found riddled by a "complacent suggestiveness, passiveness, [and] inertness" that no manner of lineation could save (qtd. in McPherson 75). Responding in kind, McPherson, Haines, Simic, and Louis Simpson offer valiant defenses of the free-verse line. They write of the poet's innate sense for the line, its impulsive unfolding, containment, and releasing of energy, its proximity to the psychic life of the poet. This manner of thinking about the line imposes some severe limitations on what it means for the line to be, as McPherson writes, "a unit to work in" (75). Less a made thing, a purposefully broken thing, the line is more an index of idiosyncratic feeling or a mimesis of our physiology.

The Field symposium has its more contrary participants as well, such as James Wright, who voices his displeasure with any poetry in which form registers merely personal whim: "every God-damned fool in America quivers with the puce longing to win life by printing at us that he is sensitive. He and Viva know that rhyme and rhythm are out. Twitch is in" (82). We need, according to Wright, a poetry with intelligence, a poetry that contains its own criticism. Instead, he writes, "the endless bad poems of our time distribute themselves automatically between masturbation and the exquisite phoniness of middle-class revolution" (82). Donald Hall, more coolly conservative and with less vitriol, doubles down on some of Wright's reservations, suggesting that "the Line . . . is an intellectual force" (88).

In a clarifying statement that encompasses both sides of this debate between body and mind, impulse and intellect, Donald Wesling has argued that "all

poetry restructures direct experience by means of devices of *equivalence*,” but that more than metrical prosodies, “free verse claims and thematizes a proximity to lived experience. [Poetry] does this by trying to replicate, project, or represent perceptual, cognitive, emotional, and imaginative processes” (“Free Verse” 426). Such a formal mimesis—whether emotional or intellectual—may be an unavoidable ingredient in the line at times. But it does not account for devices of equivalence that attempt to capture non- or anti-subjective processes, nor does this notion of equivalences offer a way of dealing with what Robert Duncan identified as a poetry of linguistic impulse, a category he offered as a necessary, even corrective, addition to Levertov’s limiting, if influential, ideas about an organic form rooted in body, mind, and nature. In short, the formal mimesis Wesling describes fails adequately to register the dynamism and range of poetry flourishing on the margins of the mainstream verse—a mainstream that the *Field* group seems circularly to both represent and discuss.

To its credit, *Epoch*’s 1980 “A Symposium on the Theory and Practice of the Line in Contemporary Poetry” moves beyond certain constraints of the *Field* debate. With a more critical edge, and with nearly thirty essays that are more broadly representative at least in terms of aesthetics if not identity, this symposium offers a crucial model for *A Broken Thing*. The symposium includes statements by a range of poets and scholars including Margaret Atwood, Seamus Heaney, Donald Davie, Sandra Gilbert, Robert Morgan, and Howard Nemerov, among many others. The editors gave each contributor a series of prompts that ranged from more craft-centered inquiries to questions of how the poet’s use of the line might accommodate any other emotional, intellectual, or social concerns. Rory Holscher and Robert Schultz’s valuable introduction offers a way of thinking about the line that remains very relevant for *A Broken Thing*, as when they direct attention to the minutiae of form: “In such seemingly esoteric considerations as how the line is turned,” they write, “we discuss how the world turns” (166). If Denise Levertov’s and Charles Olson’s sense of the line persists quietly in the *Field* symposium, their example is even more evident as intellectual and practical models in *Epoch*’s symposium. Various echoes of Olson’s projective sense of energy and open-field poetics reverberate throughout. Levertov’s core ideas regarding how the line tracks the stress of inner thought, and her notion of line as a script for performance, inform a number of the essays as well. “Energy” emerges as a dominant trope in the *Epoch* symposium, as the line becomes a kind of pacing device that contains and creates energy, momentum, and expectation. The line, here, actively shapes the content to the form, melding manner and matter.

Despite these kindred concerns, however, much of the *Epoch* symposium

remains focused on policing the boundaries between free and formal verse, and especially between prose and poetry. This more conservative aspect of the symposium prompted a typically sharp reply from Marjorie Perloff. In her essay “The Linear Fallacy,” published partly in response to the symposium, she sought to remind poets that lines should not be considered sufficient to poetry: they must be necessary. Too many poets, she argues, forget the question that should be most basic to poetry, whether formal or free: “when is lineation the right and inevitable form of verbal discourse? What necessary deformation of language, what foregrounding of semantic units does this particular exemplar of ‘art by line’ achieve?” (864). Riffing on Frost’s famous tennis metaphor, she pointedly warns that the line has become the net of free-verse forms, just another tradition to serve blindly.

As Perloff notes, however, a few voices in the *Epoch* symposium do provide a more critical and self-critical tone. Don Byrd’s passionate piece imbues technique with a palpable social urgency that moves beyond the merely poetic: “We need massive flowing and breaking intensities, not tension; we need universal participation in the pleasure of sight, sound and intellection, not elegance; we need the analytic disruptive exercise of the mind, not wit; we need the awkward spectacle of the untried move, not grace” (Holscher 180). But he calls even this earnest plea into question, inquiring after its value beyond academic debates about the line: “what are we going to say to a race that may be lucky to last another three generations? And are we going to say it in lines?” (180). Such a disarming question forces us to face our poetic and critical idealizations of the line and poetry alike. Christopher Bursk, in his brief essay, seems resigned, even quietly resentful, in the face of a poetry that fails to live up to its ideals. Craft, for him, amounts to an artful evasion; poetry, an aesthetic escape. Discussions of craft help us avoid, not address, the most crucial questions: “It is much easier for me to tell you how to break your lines,” he writes, “than for me to say to you that your poem about your father’s death is shallow and evasive” (Holscher 176). Touching on deeper social concerns, he writes how it saddens him that the *Epoch* symposium “so strongly reflects our society’s concern with technique and not our society’s lack of genuine concern for its fate and the fate of the oppressed within it. It is sad,” he continues, “that this symposium is not on justice in the poem” (176). Ezra Pound wrote that technique is the test of one’s sincerity. It seems that we too-readily miss the statement’s aphoristic wisdom when we place the emphasis on the intricacies of technique or ideals of sincerity and authenticity. It is the middle term—*test*—that underscores the

utter difficulty of any neat accommodation between poetry and life. As Bursk reminds us, it is a damn hard test.

And it is a test that the contributors to *The Line in Postmodern Poetry* (1988) take very seriously. Consisting of a handful of critical essays by James Scully, Marjorie Perloff, and Stephen Henderson among others—and supplemented by “L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Lines,” an embedded, independent anthology of shorter, more experimental reflections by poets aligned with that school—*The Line in Postmodern Poetry* offers a trenchant reply to the general drift of the *Epoch* and *Field* symposia. With the goal of replacing the Olsonian and Levertovian moment of kinetic, physio-cerebral mimesis with a sense of postmodern poetry as “the very embodiment of a socially imposed and encoded praxis” (xv), editors Robert Frank and Henry Sayre pitch the aggressively disruptive noise of postmodernism against free verse’s suspect music. Free verse had ceased to become a sincere, expressive force, and instead had become a bag of transparent tricks for the rendering of authenticity: “The free verse line, like expressionist brushwork,” they write, “has come to signify an authentic self-expression, but is used everywhere, at least potentially, in bad faith” (xvii). Thus, the primary focus of *The Line in Postmodern Poetry* is a poetry haunted not by the ghost of meter—a common theme in discussions of free verse—but by the specter of insincerity.

James Scully’s long essay, which was later included in his superb *Line Break: Poetry as Social Practice* (1988, 2005), gives voice to certain concerns shared by all the contributors when he notes that “writers . . . attempt to solve those problems they have set for themselves, but set in concert with their historical circumstances, social values, class outlook, jobs, and the innumerable opaque or transparent ‘aesthetic’ and ‘extra-aesthetic’ encouragements and discouragements visited on them.” Echoing Perloff’s argument above, he asserts that “for writers as writers the strict intramural question will be whether their technical capabilities have risen to the occasions of those problems: problems that are multifaceted, complex” (Frank 98).

Just as the critical reflections in *The Line in Postmodern Poetry* tend to view writing in relation to a much more diffuse set of concerns, they also tend to be more diverse and representative, filling notable gaps in earlier symposia. Stephen Henderson’s essay “Worrying the Line: Notes on Black American Poetry,” for example, documents how black American poetry in the 60s and 70s worked to carve out a distinct voice rooted in music and oral traditions while simultaneously struggling “with stylistic and thematic concerns inherited from the larger body of American and Western poetry” (60). These poets strove to discover ways to

render the “highly charged inventive quality of black American vernacular on the printed page,” and “how to indicate its dynamic range, its mixture of elegance and wit, its tonal contrasts with Standard English, its plasticity” (60)—and how to do all this through the shaping and modulation of the line. At a key point, his essay describes a feature of black oral and musical style known as *worrying the line*. He explains:

While it subsumes the verbal analogue of jazz sound or sonority, it is closer to the analogue of jazz phrasing. [ . . . ] Worrying the line is essentially a kind of analytical play on words, on parts of words, on qualities of words. It is as firmly entrenched in current vernacular as it is in folk speech. Originally, it referred to the personal practice of altering the pitch of notes in a given passage, or to other kinds of ornamentation often associated with melismatic singing in the black tradition. In the verbal parallel, a word or phrase is broken up and the fragments sometimes distorted to allow for affective or didactic comment. (69)

Examining the work of Carolyn Rodgers, Amiri Baraka, Nikki Giovanni, and Bob Kaufman in relation to Langston Hughes and Sterling Brown—among many others—Henderson introduces an experience and art of the line that was entirely absent in the previous symposia. Similarly, Garrett Hongo’s reflection on the evolution of his own line, pitched between Chinese poetry, Asian American history, and the adopted musics of jazz and blues, further opens the field.

The embedded or appended anthology that concludes *The Line in Postmodern Poetry* includes some of the collection’s most original meditations on the line. Bruce Andrews, in an essay he reprises and expands in *A Broken Thing*, offers a vision of line as transgression and transversal. The line, he writes, is an “explanation in action that keeps crossing the line into a politics outside (its articulation into contested hegemonies, fields of force) and bringing it back inside to challenge the constitution (and possibilities) of meaning as well as form” (178). His ideas of lineation oppose more traditional notions that signal neat boundaries and neater subjectivities. But crucially, he abandons neither the idea of lineation itself, nor its importance within experimental poetics. Lyn Hejinian’s essay similarly resists inflexible experimental ideals that discard lineation wholesale, as when she writes that she “think[s] about the line more than about any formal element in my writing” (191). She writes powerfully of the line as “the standard (however variable) of meaning in the poem, the primary unit of observation, and the measure of felt thought” (191). The line here is not an ideological sign, but

the beginning of possibility: “Lines, which may be rigid or relaxed, increasing or decreasing, long or short, ascending (questioning) or descending (decisive), predisposed (necessary) or evolving (speculative), representative of sequence or of cluster, redistribute meaning continuously within the work” (192).

Even Charles Bernstein’s sardonic poem-essay in iambic pentameter speaks beyond the confines of a narrowly ideological poetry. His poem “Of Time and the Line” reflects an academic culture of high-theory and ideology critique, but it also speaks not so much against it as productively beyond it: “When / making a line, better be double sure / what you’re lining in & what you’re lining / out & which side of the line you’re on” (215). This would seem, initially, a casually mocking ditty on Robert Frost’s finger-shaking advice in “Mending Wall,” perhaps showing how free verse now stands in place of the sturdy metrical tradition once represented by Frost. Such a reading, however, dishonors both Frost and Bernstein. Indeed, Frost’s warning about walling in and walling out, and to whom you’re likely to give offense, announces a political and ethical injunction speaking beyond the local disputes of metrical versus free verse. It seems that Bernstein, here, mocks neither Frost nor the new free-verse establishment. He mocks, rather, the broader posturing of lines of defense that too often define (and confine) the poetry world. He plays the suggestive fool here, not just a partisan joker.

The intervening decades between this burst of critical activity in the 80s and the present moment have witnessed a few notable developments in thinking about the line in poetry. In Bernstein’s edited collection *Close Listening: Poetry and the Performed Word* (1998), Perloff takes the occasion to return once more to the line. Her contribution to that volume, “After Free Verse: The New Non-linear Poetries,” urges a move beyond a narrow conception of linearity that, for her, marks the watered-down free verse in poetry anthologies such as *Naked Poetry* (1969). Identifying a clear formal evolution beyond the limited play of the line, she writes: “Just as early free-verse poets called metrical form into question . . . what is now being called into question is the line itself (98).” She looks to the critical and creative works in the “L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Lines” anthology discussed above to buttress her claim. After offering a sound bite from Bruce Andrews that captures all of his wrangling with traditional notions of the line, but none of his genuine recasting of linear concerns, she asks: “who would have thought that fewer than forty years after Olson celebrated the ‘LINE’ as the embodiment of the breath, the signifier of the heart, the line would be perceived as a boundary, a confining border, a form of packaging?” (99). She goes on to cite Bernstein’s aforementioned iambic pentameter poem, “Of Time

and the Line,” as a kind of final deconstruction of linearity where parody obviates criticism. To be sure, healthy rhetoric against the line by various experimental camps persists in “L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Lines” alongside a genuine concern for the line. But Perloff misses Bernstein’s subtle commentary on the shrill tone of this debate, a debate that seems somehow stale already in 1988. Furthermore, she fails to mention Lyn Hejinian’s piece, which certainly does anything but call the line into question. In this sense, Perloff seems to animate a debate between dueling camps that the authors she addresses had already begun to think beyond and beneath in crucial ways. And in any case, Olson himself did think of the line fundamentally as a kind of boundary and confining border (albeit in a more productive sense) as when he wrote that “Limits / are what any of us / are inside of” (21). Looking back to Wheatley’s “silken fetters,” Wordsworth’s “blank reserve,” Williams’s “attenuated power,” and Brooks’s “weep[ing] without form,” an awareness of constraint and limitation remain central to almost any enduring experiment with the line. Shifting attention to the page is certainly necessary, just as it is important to emphasize how inapt a narrow definition of the line becomes in the face of various sound, concrete, and new-media poetics. But to discard the line entirely, to insinuate a broader movement beyond it, misses its undiminished importance.

While Perloff remains invested in various ideologies of lyric, James Longenbach’s recent pocket-book *The Art of the Poetic Line* (2008) tries to dodge questions of ideology altogether. In what might as well be a response to Perloff, he writes that “some poets have argued that the rejection of line carries a kind of political charge, just as poets once felt that the rejection of rhyming verse for blank verse or blank verse for free verse carried a political charge. This may be true in a particular time at a particular place. But it cannot be true categorically” (95). Fair enough, but it is the examination of lines in particular times and places—gauging how they are both constrained by a tradition and a historical moment, and yet strain to stretch and think and sing beyond that moment—that underscores poetry’s enduring power. Instead of engaging this messiness, Longenbach proceeds from more general observations about technique to discussions of poems that exemplify those techniques. Though he develops an enormously useful vocabulary for describing three different kinds of line endings—annotating, parsing, and end-stopped—he too often reduces the line to a holding pen for syntax, the alterations and breakages of which seem to provide a kind of pure formal pleasure. Given its almost exclusive emphasis on sound and the pleasure and potential of broken syntax, Longenbach’s piece remains rather deaf to the world. He writes, in a tidy bit of common sense that is hard to refute, that the “line



has a meaningful identity only when we begin to hear its relationship to other elements in the poem” (5). Yes, but we also need to hear its relationship to an array of implicit and explicit elements in the world around the poem. We need to attend to the sound of the social that poetry, even in its most subtle formal maneuvers, alternately reflects and refuses.

Alice Fulton, in her work on fractal poetics, deftly captures the infinite formal density of the line, though she never forgets form’s integral connection to things as they are: “Any line,” she writes, “when examined closely (or magnified) will reveal itself to be as richly detailed as was the larger poem from which it was taken; the poem will contain an infinite regression of details, a nesting of pattern within pattern” (58). And yet poems, she emphasizes, are complex “linguistic models of the world’s workings,” an observation as important for thinking about poetry and science as it is for poetry and the social.

More recently, in *Blue Studios* (2006), Rachel Blau DuPlessis distills the most incisive work mentioned above in her probing discussion of the line in poetry as a charged segmentivity. Though her interests here are anchored in Frankfurt School aesthetics, she offers a useful clarification of how fundamental the line is to all poetry: “Something fairly straightforward, but highly distinctive, separates and distinguishes poetry from nearby modes like fiction and drama that also unroll in time and use sequencing tactics of various kinds,” she writes. While *narrativity* encompasses what is central to the novel, and *performativity* approximates the concerns of various dramatic forms, *segmentivity*, which she defines as “the ability to articulate and make meaning by selecting, deploying and combining segments,” fundamentally characterizes poetry. DuPlessis continues:

Both of these now-familiar neologisms indicate the practice of sequencing event, gesture, and image. Poetry also sequences; it is the creating of meaningful sequences by the negotiation of gap. . . . Poetry can then be defined as the kind of writing that is articulated in sequenced, gapped lines and whose meanings are created by occurring in bounded units, units operating in relation to pause or silence. . . . The acts of making lines and making their particular chains of rupture, seriality, and sequencing are fundamental to the nature of poetry as a genre. Fundamental to what can be said of poetry as poetry. (199)

Many contributors to *A Broken Thing* share DuPlessis’s commitment to ideas of form in both theory and practice, in both word and world, implicitly endorsing her sense that lines are where “materiality and mystery join dialectically,”

embodying a “lively tension between eloquent stasis and driven becoming” (205, 203).

A defining feature of *A Broken Thing* in relation to the preceding collections and essays mentioned is its lack of defensiveness. Though echoes of old debates persist in a few of the essays, these essays are, for the most part, unconcerned with policing boundaries between experiment and tradition, between prose and poetry, between good poetry and bad poetry. “Free verse” itself—that vague varietal of twentieth-century poetry that has vexed American poets ever since the modernists simultaneously maligned its connotations while exploiting the liberties it offered—has become a much more neutral descriptor here. That said, we should note the reaction that many poets who have committed themselves, often radically and with great innovation, to more traditional or metrical forms might have to the collection’s title: *A Broken Thing*. Doesn’t the title seem to value the line solely for its potential to break? Such a notion, one could argue, sponsors a very narrow conception of the line. That we foreground the work of William Carlos Williams, an early master of the free-verse broken line, and even go so far as to yank the title directly from his experimental *Kora in Hell*, certainly makes this all seem like a sly partisan move that belies the supposedly ecumenical vision of its editors. It is a valid point: one can enjamb the metrical line, can stretch the line, and one can elide, substitute, and behead metrical units. And there is certainly a line-break *between* lines. But one rarely *breaks* a metrical line—that’s part of a different game called free verse.

To answer this critique, one could argue that, for better or worse, the language of the “line-break” has taken on a much broader sense nearly synonymous with enjambment, which occurs in free and formal verse alike. Or, one could argue that the rhetoric of brokenness—from the recovered shards of Greek lyric poetry to the romantic cult of the fragment and beyond—echoes something crucial within the history of poetry. But a more direct defense of the language of brokenness reveals a dominant fiction about form that has guided us throughout this project, and that many of the essays included here speak to as well. After what Walter Benjamin would call the catastrophe of history, poetry as broken reflects a world as broken, even as its constructive powers collect and collate and—if only rarely and with great difficulty—transcend. We like to think that this more philosophical sense of brokenness is not utterly at odds with a poetics that seeks to reclaim the body of poetry, and for which gestures of wholeness guard against the inclination to rupture. Thus, we hope that poets and critics inclined to balk at our title will take it not as a unilateral declaration of free-verse hegemony, but as an invitation to repair, to counter this force of brokenness. As though in

answer to this hope, many of the contributors who reflect on the metrical line here do just that, as they prize integrity above brokenness, form above fragment. If nothing else, a common ground persists as the line exceeds its trappings as a partisan counter, becoming a poetic variable for all manner of extra-aesthetic concerns. Such concerns are less predictable and more wide-ranging than ever, and it is on this stage—where fictions of form converge and collide—that this conversation about contemporary poetry and poetics takes its place.

Noting a similar sense of a post-partisan poetics, Donald Wesling, a careful thinker on the line of both traditional prosodies and non-metrical forms, writes that “there seems to be something like a critical consensus that we appear to have arrived at a historical point of demarcation, a point at which polemics end and a renewed understanding and appreciation of poems and their diverse prosodies begin” (*Scissors* 325). Mirroring this shift of critical opinion, we are tempted to borrow the language of hybridity that Cole Swensen eloquently deploys in her introduction to the recent anthology *American Hybrid* (2009). In *A Broken Thing*, too, there is what she calls a “thriving center of alterity,” a healthy disregard for aesthetic divisions. Such hybridity, Swensen implies, is not a concession, not a collapsing toward the middle, nor is it a neatly dialectical movement to the next new thing. Similarly, the essays in *A Broken Thing* lack the cohesion of any concerted movement in any particular direction, and this is one of the collection’s primary strengths. The essays here—the result of nearly 200 personalized solicitations—offer a diffuse hybridity, a dynamic hodgepodge that we hope captures the breadth of poetic practice rather than isolates or idealizes any narrow tendency. Our unique moment of hybridity—sponsored by the professionalization of writing and the growth of small, independent presses, and also, more profoundly, by the trenchant conceptualizations of hybrid identities and poetics that have emerged over the past three decades—shows a slackening of partisan posturing about, but no less commitment to, poetic form.

In its tendency toward a rigor of range, *A Broken Thing* shares much with Donald Hall’s classic anthology *Claims for Poetry* (1982). Though Hall’s anthology does not share the concentrated focus of *A Broken Thing*, it deserves special mention for its prescient defense of the kind of hybridity and ecumenism discussed above. Emerging on the heels of the *Field* and *Epoch* symposia, *Claims for Poetry* harbors none of the early conservatism that had tended to mark his career ever since he unfurled his landmark anthology *New Poets of England and America* (1957), which fell decidedly on the reactionary side of the unfolding anthology wars of the 60s and 70s. Instead, *Claims for Poetry* forswears allegiance to any single tendency, offering an arbitrary alphabetical list of over thirty essays by poets as different as

A. R. Ammons, Wendell Berry, Robert Duncan, Sandra Gilbert, John Hollander, X. J. Kennedy, Audre Lorde, Jackson Mac Low, Ron Silliman, Mark Strand, and Alice Walker. Donald Hall's eloquent defense of his anthology speaks to our purpose just as well. He writes of the dynamic "accidents of juxtaposition" that the arbitrary ordering affords. With such a motley crew, one cannot possibly neatly navigate what he calls the "collage of contentions"; one can only catalog their divergent claims for poetry: "conflicting, overlapping, contentious; avant-garde, reactionary; immemorial, neoteric; light, heavy, angry, funny, political, aesthetic, academic, psychological, innovative, practical, high-minded, abstract, frivolous, pedagogic" (xi). With no overlap in authors, and with nearly twice as many essays, we hope that *A Broken Thing* will become as indispensable as *Claims for Poetry*, both for new generations of poets and for scholars eager to track developments in twenty-first-century poetry and poetics.

## MAPPING THE LINE

Emily Rosko

We have such lines here—to name a few: lines of sight and lines of thought; the line as musical and textual scoring, as voicing and orality; the line as genealogy and elegy; materialities of the line, both in the world and in cyberspace. As Lisa Steinman generously noted in an early response to the essays assembled here, "to consider the tropes used to describe lines of poetry—and to notice that they are tropes—is precisely the kind of insight this diverse collection allows." Needless to say, it is difficult adequately to survey the essays included here, which represent a diversity of practice and a historical arc that take us, quite literally, from Hammurabi's Code to hypertext and Twitter. The attempt that follows remains a knowingly partial gloss, what Robert Creeley might call a quick graph. We encourage each reader to make her or his own map.

Near the start of the collection, Marianne Boruch articulates a common theme throughout these essays. "The line against the larger wealth of the sentence," she writes, "is a rebel thing which undercuts order. With it comes all that can't be fully controlled: the irrational, the near-deranged, the deeply personal and individual utterance." Sarah Kennedy supplies us with a more visceral image that we might keep in mind when considering the line's critical, even violent, energy. Her figure for lineation was conceived in a grocery store parking lot in

the face of a howling, growling dog unleashed in the bed of a 4×4: “The poetic line: a big dog in a truck.” Conceding that “lines of poetry are musical in their rhythmic cadences, yes, and they make meaning(s), yes, and they are often beautiful, yes,” she continues to argue that “what makes a line of words a poetic line rather than just part of a sentence broken halfway across the page is that tensive moment at the last word, when the entire animal rushes to the boundary in full gorgeous fury.” For many others, however, it is not this more pointed danger, but how the line holds us close in its cadence, how the line shades into music. “Whether we attend to the fact or not,” Tim Seibles begins, “poetry has deep roots in song. Beyond their meanings, words are sounds, notes if you will.” Whether we view the line as a marker of subversive, even dangerous, power or as the pure pulse of poetic song, as a matter of technical mastery or as an invitation to philosophical and social reflection, these essays as a whole remain interested in the grounding question of how and why poets do or do not break lines. The varied and inventive answers to this grounding question contained herein offer so many crucial windows into how poetry means, and why it continues to matter.

Sturdy conversations underscoring the centrality of the poetic line find new life here. Timothy Liu combines a lively anecdote with his take on a classic pedagogical lesson involving the transposition of poems into prose and vice versa. Robert Wrigley makes no fuss about it and declares that the poetic line, whether free or metered, is the only tool: “All the other attributes poetry is said to possess,” he proffers, “are bullshit.” Other poets—including Bruce Bond, Scott Cairns, and Thomas Lux—reinvigorate these fundamental genre distinctions with powerful statements about how the line remains fundamental to poetry, how it holds a provocative agency that involves the reader in the poem’s unfolding: its momentary plays against concision, to borrow Cairns’s apt phrase with its Frostian echoes. Indeed, many of the essays here touch on that central tension between sense and syntax, but they often give this traditional binary a new twist, a new language. Cole Swensen, for example, thinks of “the crux of poetry as twofold—as excess and as incommensurability: the shape of sense and the shape of language simply aren’t the same, and poetry is the form that, above all others, refuses to make light of that difference. And so it must, instead, address it. Poetry has historically addressed it through the line-break.”

Confessing that she has become wary “of thinking about the poetic line solely . . . as single-voiced encounters playing with expectation and the ephemeral” where emphasis falls always at the line’s end, Catherine Imbriglio describes how she has come to think of “the entire line, not just beginning and end words, as

setting up tensions between the temporal and the spatial, with *each* line having a hard-core relation with *every other line and every space* in the poem, not just the ones before and after it.” Concurring that we often tend to overvalue line-breaks over the line itself, V. Penelope Pelizzon turns our attention to the beginnings of lines, and, through a reading of Frank Bidart, she examines how the rhythm of a line can be established or productively disrupted by what she terms “soft” or “strong” entrances. Molly Peacock puts pressure on the middle of lines as a place to delicately fold in rhyme. Annie Finch, who has previously pursued T. S. Eliot’s notion that one might discover the metrical code, the ghost of meter, in free verse, foregoes the dug-in defensiveness of New Formalist polemics as she argues for the presence of something like a line-break after each poetic foot. Tellingly, even though she sardonically reflects on how the line has too often become the lone tool for free-verse poets, she defines her sense of metrics not against, but in positive relation to, that dominant facet of the free-verse line. Kevin Prufer looks not only to the ghost of meter in free verse, but to the uses of freedom within fixed forms. Expanding the kinds of things that fall within the purview of the line, Terese Svoboda describes how the line lurks even in prose as well.

Departing from the concerns of technique, other contributors more philosophically defend the value of the poetic line as the singular unit of meaning in poetry. For Heather McHugh, the line models a finely honed and necessary attention, even shelter, in terms that echo Frost’s famous definition of poetry as a momentary stay against confusion. “The poetic line,” she writes, “is an advertency constructed to contend with a world of inadvertencies—inadvertencies that, otherwise, could swamp us.” Graham Foust sees the poetic line as an integer of consciousness, where it figures as both the enactment of a “thinking subject” and, at the line-break’s pause, the poet’s consciousness thrown back on the “thought-about object.” Placing equal weight on the importance of every line in a poem—of each line’s purposeful integrity—Alberto Ríos reminds us: “A line is a moment that has value right then, and which deserves some of our time.” Noting a very similar meditative potential in the line, Kazim Ali offers the following figure: The poem is “not mere rhetoric or reportage or description, but pure mystery, an aspirant to the divine. A book of poems is an abbey of aspirants, each reciting a line to herself in meditation.” Suggesting how mysterious and private poems can appear, even to their writers, and questioning any poetics that would seek to tell us what a poem ought or ought not do, John Gallaher concludes that the poem itself must teach us how to read it: “The poem becomes a one-time use definition of line-break, line, stanza, and so forth.”

The philosophical graces the physical in Susan Stewart's fluid essay in which she embraces the breath, the voice, the hand, and the body's dance, all of which underlie a line's making. Drawing attention to the gendered language of poetic discourse and its limited binary logic, she jests: "All my endings would be feminine unless they were masculine." Catherine Barnett weaves in a subtle feminist critique to the work of lineation when she admits that "there is an energy in breaking that is perhaps too often sworn or wooed or won out of women. I spend an awful lot of time trying to fix things, trying to make things. I am glad to be able to break." This visceral physicality that accompanies the making and breaking of lines is key for Carl Phillips as well: "There's the strange, undeniable pleasure both in controlling and in being controlled," he writes.

Arielle Greenberg blends the physicality of the line with its potential for an expansive rhetoric as she considers what she calls the "hyperextension of the line," which involves "pushing the line past the point of sentence unit into something that feels at once fragmented and stretched." Cynthia Hogue, moving more explicitly from formal to social reflection, explores how the calculated spatial suspension that enables many of Williams's punning lines becomes devastating in Leslie Scalapino's revisions of them in the context of the recent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. "The line," Hogue reminds us, "is telling, not only in what it says but what it doesn't say." Paisley Rekdal further argues how lineation supports meanings that are not explicitly voiced, enabling broader explorations of identity and cultural critique, something she finds exemplified in the increasingly fragmented lines of Myung Mi Kim's "Food, Shelter, Clothing."

In the same way that Rekdal turns to Kim, or Hogue to Scalapino, many of the contributors here root their reflections in a fine attention to the work of other poets. This crucial dialogue comes to life in Dana Levin's comparative look at Allen Ginsberg's hurtling, uncontainable line and the contrastive appreciation it inspires for the radical enjambments of a poet like Michael Dickman. "I could meditate for quite some time on 'I'm not dead but I am,'" she tells us, reflecting on a line from Dickman. Joanie Mackowski distinguishes the "productively destabilizing free-verse lines" in Forrest Gander's work against the more gimmicky line-break one encounters all too often. Shara McCallum turns to poems by Gwendolyn Brooks and Yusef Komunyakaa to show "how the line in free verse, chafing against or in concert with the sentence, creates a rhythm that corresponds to the inflections of an actual, human voice." Touching on poets as different as Longfellow and May Swenson, William Carlos Williams and Carl Sandburg, Ravi Shankar unpacks notions of pace, tradition, risk, and sport that chart the possibilities of lineation. Wayne Miller revisits Emily Dickinson's use

of the line, offering striking close readings that show how her dash often does the work of a line-break. Looking to the work of Lily Brown and G. C. Waldrep to demonstrate the fundamentally re-orienting quality of our best poetry—a quality that becomes a kind of ethical charge—Joshua Marie Wilkinson argues that in such poems we “discover new techniques of the poetic line” that have the ability to “undo what we have unwittingly come to expect from poetry, from language, from one another.”

Many poets here reevaluate poetic traditions or trace deep histories of the line, theoretical, formal, or otherwise. Jenny Mueller and Karla Kelsey offer the kind of incisive reappraisals of modernist and language-poetry practices that too often escape critical attention. As the sole contributor to endorse the syllabic line, Robyn Schiff argues that the formal constraint presented by syllable-counting demands “the most physical encounter with words both orally and textually.” Joshua Clover’s more theoretical piece pursues Theodor Adorno’s influential claim that “the unresolved antagonisms of reality appear in art in the guise of immanent problems of artistic form” (8). Turning to the emergence of the free-verse line and the burgeoning problematic of form that resulted in the early twentieth century, Clover suggests one answer to the question of “why this particular mutation of the line appears as an immanent problem of poetic form around the turn of the century.” Taking us back to the speculative origins of the line, Johanna Drucker turns to ancient Babylonian inscription, highlighting the way the graphic line was used at times in cuneiform writing to divide signs into semantic units. This stunning piece of poetic archeology beautifully supplements her essay from *The Line in Postmodern Poetry* on “The Visual Line.”

While many contributors here look to the practice of their peers, others reflect upon the sense of the line that motivates their own work. There are lively accounts of personal encounters with the line and its difficult potentialities by Brent Cunningham, John O. Espinoza, Kimiko Hahn, Raza Ali Hasan, Martha Rhodes, and Dana Roeser. Meanwhile, poets such as J. P. Dancing Bear, Patrick Phillips, and Mary Ann Samyn track the idiosyncratic ways that the line becomes a measure and a means for composition in their own work. For their part, Ben Lerner and Donald Platt offer candid insights into what motivates and sustains a broken line in their work. Harnessing speech acts, such as the stutter, false start, and interruption, and also using a technique that he calls “braiding lines,” Lerner writes that his goal with each line is to “focus attention on the activity of thinking over the finished thought.” As a practitioner of a highly particular use of the line across a career, Platt explains that his line use (of alternating long and short lines arranged in tercets) offers a generative constraint with which



to shape poetic thought. Platt is an interesting exception among poets insofar as the line—his line, across a body of work—is not a variable but a constant, a kind of signature.

Other contributions, more difficult to typify, range from the cutting-edge to the colloquial, from the experimental to the everyday. Evie Shockley, with John Cage's mesostic form in mind, proposes exchanging strict linearity for more "circuitous routes" as she details this operation in one of her own poems. At the forefront of new-media poetics, Stephanie Strickland argues that in digital poetry the line does not break but embodies "an entire interactional system," thriving dynamically and simultaneously across multiple digital dimensions. Playing with the ways the line is woven into everyday language and cliché, H. L. Hix raids the colloquial for insights into the poetic. Noah Eli Gordon offers four cryptically Blakean allegories, each concluding with riddle- or koan-like keys that often obscure as much as they clarify, as when he concludes the first allegory with the chiasmic observation that "the line fears its love of tradition and loves its fear of innovation." Charles Bernstein supplies the most micro of contributions here, with a poem consisting of three sections of three, four, and five lines, all knocking the language of cliché off center just enough to force insight: "you / break it / you / thought it," the middle poem scolds. Good advice indeed, for, as he concludes: "a / line is / a / terrible thing / to waste."

The line lives in these essays most often as a spur to thought, a barometer of historical change, and an index of current creativity. "I wonder, above all else," Kathy Fagan writes in her essay here, "what a poet's up to with a line. I adore how charged the choices are. How vital to the body of the poem and its meaning, and how ferociously poets, experienced or not, cling to lineation." The obverse, of course, is true as well, and a number of essays here demonstrate that a poet's questioning or even rejection of lineation remains just as vital to the body and meaning of the poem. This broken thing does not require our critical care, some suggest; it requires fundamental realignment, if not utter obliteration. Bruce Andrews revisits and refines his 1988 piece that appeared in *The Line in Postmodern Poetry*, filling out his previous essay via generous inter- and intra-sentence glosses that highlight the reception, rather than production, of lines. Against normative lines—lines of control, property, policing, decorum—he pitches the line as a "countering, an unorthodoxy on [& of] lines of space & time." Yet he maintains a sobering sense of how poetic lines and the theorizing that surrounds them so often fail to gauge and reconfigure the social: "but don't we want to get off the surface," he writes, interrupting his own heady theoretical riff more than two decades later. Gabriel Gudding tosses aside even this strained

and tested idealism that one glimpses in Andrews, stocking his representative poetry workshop full of straw people and offering a list of poetic offenses. His essay is a rollicking catalogue of lyric hyperbole where the line exists as a “fascist reliquary,” a “vomito-aesthetic concrescence of a larger, mystifying ideology.” Such vitriol makes one wonder whether his gracious pastoral coda voices his earnest hope or his own cynically deferred dream. A striking rhetorical counterpoint to Gudding’s piece, Emmy Pérez’s essay weighs the relevance of the poetic line against social realities that exist much closer to home: “How to teach about the poetic line, about desire and syntax, about a poem’s formal considerations as equally significant to the exploration of content, as a search for social justice and possibility,” she asks, “when students and I are standing in Hidalgo, Texas, touching the new concrete border wall?” Voicing a strained hope that the poetic and the political might be integrally related, her essay demands much of us as line-makers and line-readers, but even more as human beings straddling a fraught border.

Confronting a very different sort of material reality, a few notable entries here interrogate how the page imposes limits to the poetic line. Hadara Bar-Nadav raises the question of whether a prose poem has line-breaks—breaks that are determined by page size and formatting, such that a prose poem in one venue offers radically different meanings than it might in another where more generous margins alter the arbitrarily encoded endings. Rachel Zucker forces a different understanding of what we mean by the economy of the line when she discusses how she decided to pay a press so that her poems could appear in a wide-trim book size that could accommodate her long lines. Christina Davis echoes this concern for the page and how a poet’s lines operate within set dimensions when she asks of Dickinson’s work: “Who are we to say that her lines are not as long as Whitman’s in proportion to their original, originating space?” In her essay, Mei-mei Berssenbrugge discusses this idea of space and how she felt the accommodating wideness of a line pulled across a horizontal page: “To register many small colorations or distinctions, I needed a long, pliant thread. I was also transforming some philosophical ideas into the lyric, and I needed room.” In appreciation of Berssenbrugge’s line, Christine Hume begins her tribute to this crucial figure with a rhetorical question: “Remember rotating a journal sideways for the first time to read the Mei-mei Berssenbrugge line?” Such a question kindles a kind of wonder that the poetic line can alter not only how we use the page, but how we conceive of it and hold it.

In what remains a distinguishing aspect of this collection, a number of poets have exchanged theoretical or lyrical prose reflections for enactments of the

line itself in works driven by image, collage, association, accumulation, and, of course, line-breaks. Responding to a reading by poet Raúl Zurita, Norma Cole reflects on lines not broken but shattered, where “everything opens up”—a phrase that suggests both certain possibilities of form and also a violent entry into a shattered world-historical reality. For Sarah Gridley and Sarah Vap, explorations of the line blend autobiography and literary pastiche, as when Vap hears in the line a directive to “Go back” as she traces a personal (and a universal) genealogy through parents and children, landscape and nature. Fanny Howe’s unique poetic creation embodies an argument for plain poetry as a tool for writing instruction in the classroom: “If the children could see / the points where breath / and length come together / they might decipher / the necessity of syntax,” she argues. “They might feel the stirrings / of love for harmony / and complexity / that exists in grammar.”

Given the enormous wealth and range of poetic thought in this collection, it is important to note what appear as recurring intensities. First, a preponderance of pastoral imagery courses through these essays. Urban landscapes—so fundamental to poetic modernism from Charles Baudelaire to Langston Hughes, and crucial as well to the lines of postwar poets such as Frank O’Hara and George Oppen—are almost entirely absent. These contributions do much more than equate poetry to nature, of course, and it is stunning to note the richness of the eco-minded figures that flower here, as when Laura Mullen describes the line as “a scored portion of shared sky.” For Camille Dungy, the variable motion of ocean waves correlates with the poetic line, and for Donald Revell, the poetic line embodies a “motile” movement, which he senses palpably in nature. Although urban architecture constitutes part of Eleni Sikelianos’s explorations, she moves beyond the city in favor of nature’s line models such as “the jointed segments in arthropods.”

A second distinct node of concern has to do with the somber tone that recurs throughout. Where Olsonian discussions of the line’s energy course through *Epoch*’s symposium, an unmistakable elegiac quality resides in many essays here. Though never an absolute focus, it lingers in the background just as it lingers in life, as when Jenny Mueller imagines the free-verse line in age: “What does one make of this wild child so many years on, now that it is bald not in birth but in dotage? Writing with this line today, we rarely associate it with the shock of the new—if by ‘new’ we also mean youthful. In fact, the modern line feels quite old, bearing as it does the freight of modernism’s appalled hopes.” It seems that after periods of prosodic bickering, there is a return to a more authentic and grounded reflection on matters of form. Furthermore, though one cannot

definitively announce a shifting ground, one wonders to what extent these concentrations on elegy and death suggest some anxieties about the role of poetry in culture itself, just as the emphases on organic imagery occur alongside an increasingly imperiled Earth. Or perhaps this elegiac temper highlights a certain aging of the very terms we use to discuss poetic concepts. As Ed Dorn reminds us, this talk of the line is an aged and aging discourse.

For all the discovery and energy engendered in the line, then, it might finally seem a vehicle of loss. The line is something—to borrow a line from Robert Creeley’s “The Innocence”—always “partial, partially kept,” a presence verging on an absence (118). But the line also summons the desire to begin again, somewhere. And so we begin, *A Broken Thing*.

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