

So Much Depends Upon / Enjambment:  
A Short Study in Indeterminacy, Recursion, and Penumbral Poetics

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## Introduction: Enjambment as a Vertical Principle

The line is Buddha; the sentence is Socrates.  
– Charles Simic

Within William Carlos Williams' short poem "The Great Figure," the sentence is not necessarily a meaningful unit of language, as the poem is allotted only one:

Among the rain  
and lights  
I saw the figure 5  
in gold  
on a red  
firetruck  
moving  
tense  
unheeded  
to gong clangs  
siren howls  
and wheels rumbling  
through the dark city.

The formal effect of the poem, when compared to what we might imagine as its thoroughly horizontal prose cognate "Among the rain and lights I saw the figure 5 in gold on a red firetruck moving tense unheeded to gong clangs siren howls and wheels rumbling through the dark city," is to reconstitute this single sentence's body entirely into a new linguistic object. Or rather, it is to create a linguistic object that is understood and experienced only in direct relation to its implicit horizontal cognate, which may have never existed independently (we cannot assume that Williams ever conceived of the verse flattened into prose) yet is perhaps necessary to being intelligible, predicated as it is on the continuity of the sentence. We know the sentence by its run; Williams gives it a rise, or a fall, over this run. In its 31 words stretched over 13 lines, the sentence is sculpted so

that it is granted properties of physical space, contour, and duration, its semantics reshuffled, even as it purports to unify its scattered parts toward the singular aim of describing one thing, the “great figure.”

But versification here does not merely amount to a poet’s indulgence of a whim to spin a sentence of language onto a new axis. The poem is a study in free verse enjambment, to the extent that it hews even single words into lines. Its hierarchy is transposed from the strictly semantic to the eminently spatial; it has an up and down, and, narrowly, a left and a right; it, too, like the poem’s subject, becomes a “great figure.”<sup>1</sup> And while some of the line breaks act as implicit punctuation – one could argue for invisible commas after “lights,” “tense,” perhaps “unheeded,” “clangs,” perhaps “howls,” and perhaps “wheels” – the verticalization of the poem, draping its language along irregular terraces of lines like a landscape ink painting of Lu Guang, performs the lineation that regulates our sense of it, that dictates the mode and tenor and overall experience of the reading act.<sup>2</sup> If anything, the absence of punctuation only heightens the effect of the enjambment, or even deliberately invokes its powers: without commas, we can only guess in reverse – after reading a line – as to whether we could appropriately infer a comma (or comma-caliber pause) to cap the end of the preceding line; and we lose in large part the notion of what might be the normal deterministic prose rhythm of the sentence to Williams’ own rhythm, distributed over his idiosyncratic space and time, varied and unpredictable.

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<sup>1</sup> Thank you to Professor McGann for sharing this observation.

<sup>2</sup> Lu Guang (陸廣), Chinese landscape painter of the Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368).

In this and numerous other poems, Williams divides up language as if to constrain our experience of it to only one nerve at a time. Thought and perception arrive by millimeters and inches (and carriage returns); we seem to be afforded only one sensation at any given moment. And while this is not Williams' sole mode of versification (*Spring and All*, for instance, can be read as anthologizing his disparate and diverse poetic practices), it is this technique of intense enjambment that continues to have a lasting influence on contemporary verse practice. Yet Williams' use of enjambment is imitated but not exactly copied by his contemporary disciples, and this may be in part due to his technique less of creating radically disjunctive enjambments than of allowing the verbal to unspool from the rigidity of the sentence, distributing the force of language throughout textual space and time. In this mode, enjambment for Williams serves as a method to aerate language, to unblock its channels and orifices and to insist on its porosity and discontinuity rather than immediacy and cohesion.

As an undergraduate reading Louise Glück and seeing everywhere the influence she has had on currently practicing writers, I came to wonder if part of her influence on others incorporated some of Williams' influence upon her: the measured lines, their gradual, unhurried accumulation, their sense of ambulatory aimlessness at times that feels as if it is moving nowhere and then reveals that it has in fact moved everywhere at once, as in "The Rock":

Insignia  
of the earth's  
terrible recesses, spirit  
of darkness, of  
the criminal mind, I feel  
certain there is within you  
something human, to be

approached in speech. How else [...]³

As with Williams, Glück's poem rations itself to us by scant word and syllable; the dominant motion is once again vertical, down into "the earth's terrible recesses" and inward into the nature of the addressee. Its effect is that, through the moderating pace of enjambment, we get to witness an apostrophic subject being fashioned from scratch. This subject only finally becomes worthy of address in line 7, when mercurial apostrophe flirts with the possibility of acquiring the legitimacy of interpersonal conversation with "something human." We start with the conspicuously abstract "insignia" that is mythologized (spirit of darkness), then anthropomorphized (criminal mind), then made explicitly human, then speech-capable. It is not until the succeeding line that we discover that the apostrophic addressee is the serpent who tempted Eve – or at least its distant cousin. The slow pace has belied the far-flung intervals of transformation from abstraction into slithering creature underfoot that have been traversed; the subject has emerged at last, but it was no easy process. In the Miltonic rendering of the same address – "Out of my sight, thou Serpent" – it does not evolve beyond that insignia-like, spirit-like ethereality into, as in Glück's rendition, an ordinary creature of flesh and blood that the speaker can bug with questions and concerns about the afterlife.<sup>4</sup>

Here, the heavy enjambment allows the apostrophic subject, much like Williams' firetruck as a descriptive subject, to accumulate in a way that it could not with its horizontal cognate, like a photograph slowly developing without the raw overexposure of the flat prose sentence. Her luminous insights in each of her lines, if offered all at once,

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<sup>3</sup> Louise Glück, "The Rock" from *Louise Glück: Poems 1962-2012* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2012), 336; originally from *Meadowlands*.

<sup>4</sup> John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, Book X, line 867.

would conflagrate into a glare, washing out its delicate subject. The precise, almost scientific decanting of language evidences a skillful and deliberate use of enjambment: not too much at once, not too little, pausing at line ends but never quite resting, sustaining enough forward momentum to continue the sense of the sentence as it stretches over eight lines. Like Williams, she creates a new verbal object with contours, duration, phases.

My initial task here has been to draw a line, via enjambment, connecting Glück's verse practice and Williams'. But the overall purpose of this paper is to suss out a theory or two about how enjambment is operating more generally, exemplified in Williams and Glück and others but to the extent that they are representative of what is a wider verse practice, due to their large spheres of influence. My basic question is perhaps this: does enjambment have a central, unifying principle, or set of principles? If we define enjambment as the language of a poem "straddling" or "striding over" one line into the next, what is the enjambed line "striding" over? Is it merely a non-oral printing convention? Something that has cropped up merely as part of the logistics of the physical document of the poem, or its mnemonic? A textual and semantic vacuum? The idea of a vacuum, which connotes both a space and a condition of that space, interests me, and I would hazard that a space *is* being traversed or straddled in the process of enjambment – the space between "earth's" and "terrible recesses," the space between "among the rain" and "and lights." The character of this space and what it may contain is hinted at in various writings on enjambment – in a lexicon that includes "gaps," "blanks," "hesitations," "lacunae" – yet an overarching principle of enjambment remains unarticulated.

In attempting to answer these questions, I will first look at some conceptions of what enjambment is exactly, then conduct a small survey of its common and not-so-common effects. Finally, I will propose three types of enjambment and the effects they propagate:

1. Enjambment that creates a deliberate cognitive blank, which organizes poetic figuration and compels the reader into the poem.
2. Enjambment that creates recursion, which effects a non-linearity within verse and makes the line self-referential.
3. Enjambment that creates its own linguistic tense, which is realized as a shift in the temporality of the poem.

### Defining Enjambment

April is the cruelest month, breeding  
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing  
Memory and desire, stirring  
Dull roots with spring rain.  
Winter kept us warm, covering  
Earth in forgetful snow, feeding  
A little life with dried tubers.

Enjambment is commonly defined as “the carrying over of a sentence from one line to the next.”<sup>5</sup> In the opening to T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* above, the present participles ending lines 1-3 and 5-6 exemplify this – “breeding,” “mixing,” “stirring,” “covering,” and “feeding” all deliberately revolt against the phrase or clause ending marked by the comma that immediately precedes the word, rejecting the tidiness of the end-stopped line, hooking us into the poem’s downward movement. The line-end litany of transitive verbs seek out their direct object in the next line, “carrying over” the syntax from one line to the next. As John Hollander thriftily puts it, enjambment is exactly this

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<sup>5</sup> Oxford English Dictionary, and elsewhere.

“nonalignment of syntax and lineation.”<sup>6</sup> It comes from the French *enjamber*, meaning “to straddle” or “to stride over,” reflecting the verse structure of the syntax not ending at the line break (which we would call an end-stopped line) but instead flowing over the break and into the next line below. The French root also contributes the sense of “to encroach,” another iteration of a persistent metaphor of closing a distance or gap. And some definitions track the OED’s but substitute *sense* for *sentence*: “the carrying over of sense from one line to the next.”<sup>7</sup> Mark Strand and Eavan Boland define it similarly as “sense” opposed to the construction of the line, essentially avoiding syntactical considerations altogether.<sup>8</sup>

The use of this term is interesting in that it embraces two opposing notions at once: the connectedness of the preceding line to the succeeding line, but also the formal syntactic disjuncture between the two lines. The technique of straddling presupposes a bifurcation of the sentence; it straddles or strides over only because it has been deliberately broken. Hollander adopts and explicates Milton’s view of enjambment as “sense variously drawn out from one verse into another,” which seems to convey both unity (of a unified sense between verses) and division (of the “sense,” or at least the language, into line units).<sup>9</sup> Bruce Heiden, however, argues against enjambment as necessarily fragmenting language – sense drawn out but not past the snapping point –

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<sup>6</sup> John Hollander, “‘Sense Variously Drawn Out’: On English Enjambment,” *Vision and Resonance: Two Senses of Poetic Form* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975), 93.

<sup>7</sup> Margaret Drabble, ed., *The Oxford Companion to English Literature*, 5th ed. (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1985).

<sup>8</sup> Mark Strand and Eavan Boland, *The Making of a Poem: A Norton Anthology of Poetic Forms* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2000), 290.

<sup>9</sup> Hollander, “Sense Variously Drawn Out,” 93.



seeing the pause or “closure” of the line break instead as a juncture where lines or phrases connect. “Verses are *rotations*,” he posits, “and every end is another beginning.”<sup>10</sup>

Beyond the ambit of the more formal definitions, Giorgio Agamben defines enjambment as “the opposition of a metrical limit to a syntactical limit, of a prosodic pause to a semantic pause.”<sup>11</sup> In enshrining the existence(s) of the “pause” into his definition, he invokes Valéry’s definition of a poem as “a prolonged hesitation between sound and sense.” Hesitations or pauses, both spatial (via the blank space and the line jump) and temporal (a pause for the eye and/or the ear), are effected through enjambment in particular for Agamben – not just lineation. And this notion of pauses is ubiquitous within treatments of enjambment, even if it is omitted from common definitions. To straddle the gulf between two lines, a pause is created; to enjamb is to break language into lines at a specific point, but also to reunite them, and also to pause somewhere between the breaking and the reunification.

Several observations on the effects of enjambment, as distinct from lineation or versification in general, can probably be made without controversy, and are likely obvious even to the newcomer to poetic form:

1. Enjambment can fragment the sentence into the unit(s) of the line, which need not coincide with the sentence.
2. It can frame the language of the line both visually (between margins and within blank space) and aurally (between pauses at line breaks due to the natural rhythm of the line or breath) in a manner in which syntax is disinclined to frame it.
3. It can interrupt and suspend syntactic order by withholding the predicate(s) to the preceding line, deferring language.
4. It can create ambiguity of meaning by interfering with semantic resolution.

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<sup>10</sup> Bruce Heiden, “Narrative in Poetry: A Problem of Narrative Theory,” *NARRATIVE*, Vol. 22, No. 2 (May 2014): 274.

<sup>11</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *The End of the Poem: Studies in Poetics*, tr. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 109.

From there, however, opinions diverge. Observations and napkin theories abound both on the compositional and critical sides of the aisle of verse study – for instance, poet Wesley McNair’s insight that as poets “our purpose through end-stopping and enjambment is finally to reconstruct the sentence” (it is unlikely Williams would readily agree to this), as well as the further curious observation that “enjambment more than once, a statement in free verse may come to resemble a question.”<sup>12</sup> Ben Lerner intriguingly notes how enjambment troubles the mnemonic rationale for verse lineation, eroding the line as a discrete and memorable unit and in some instances making it more *difficult* to remember (and, importantly, to *recite*) the lines.<sup>13</sup> He opens *The Hatred of Poetry* by recounting how, as a schoolboy, he flubbed a homework assignment of memorizing and reciting what he cleverly thought would be a short, easy poem – Marianne Moore’s “Poetry,” which famously begins “I, too, dislike it” and only consisted of three lines in total in its 1967 version – because he was tripped up by a “deliberately clumsy” enjambment between the words “in” and “it” straddling lines two and three:

I, too, dislike it.  
Reading it, however, with a perfect contempt for it, one discovers in  
it, after all, a place for the genuine.

Yet enjambment’s centrality to modern verse practice is not always apparent, if we judge by the relative dearth of deep scholarship on the subject (compared to the rewarding forays in recent decades into poetic metaphor and metonymy). This may be due to it being tacitly accepted as one of the very premises of verse itself, like pigment might be in oil painting or sound in music – too fundamental to disturb. Accordingly, the

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<sup>12</sup> Wesley McNair, “On Craft: Advice for Beginning Poets,” WesleyMcNair.com, <http://wesleymcnair.com/popup-oncraft4.html> (last accessed April 10, 2019).

<sup>13</sup> Ben Lerner, *The Hatred of Poetry* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2016), 3.

stakes seemingly involved concerning enjambment will vary widely with the author or critic. On the high stakes end: in her work on Emily Dickinson, Cristanne Miller recognizes in her practice of radical enjambment a generative engine for Dickinson's poetic thought itself – enjambment is her thinking apparatus, the brain within her poetry.<sup>14</sup> Agamben goes one bold step further, declaring that “the possibility of enjambment constitutes the *only criterion* for distinguishing poetry from prose” (emphasis mine).<sup>15</sup> For him, then, enjambment is what makes a poem a poem. It is likely his view ought to be constrained to modern verse, or specifically *vers libre*, as the type of enjambment in pre-modern metrical verse differs in nature, and is not the subject of this paper – enjambment that assumes and abides within a strict metrical framework. Robert Hass maintains that “in the history of metrical poetry, there just aren't instances of enjambment, that is, of ending the line, where there is not a pause in ordinary speech,” indicating that metrical enjambments are at the very least phrasal, generally.<sup>16</sup> While this may not hold as an absolute over the entire run of the history of metrical poetry (especially as post-*vers libre* metrical verse may seek now and then to appropriate the more radical enjambment of its modern cousin – see for instance Robert Frost<sup>17</sup>), radical enjambment, as Hass and Miller term it, perhaps was too violative of the ongoing contract of formal rhyme and meter, and required a special warrant to disrupt its music.

Yet the audacity of Agamben's statement is hardly diminished, though it is contrary to the run of the discourse, which has overall tended to approach the subject of

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<sup>14</sup> Cristanne Miller, “Dickinson's Radical Enjambments” (EDIS Paris, 2016).

<sup>15</sup> Agamben, *The End of the Poem*, 109.

<sup>16</sup> Robert Hass, *A Little Book On Form: An Exploration into the Formal Imagination of Poetry* (New York: Ecco, 2017), 421.

<sup>17</sup> Consider, for instance, “Fire and Ice”: “To say that for destruction ice / Is also great”.

enjambment only indirectly – as incidental to certain authors or even certain poems, as essential but vague in its effects, or as so inherent an assumption of (especially modern) verse that it merits little remark in the first place. John Hollander and Stephen Cushman are outliers in this, as both have conducted in depth studies of enjambment in the poetry of Milton and William Carlos Williams, respectively, that nevertheless ramify beyond their instant subjects.

And yet as obvious an element of verse as it is, at times poets and critics alike, when it is brought to issue, have deliberately shied away from peering too deeply into its mechanism, as if to trespass within its intricacies with the secularity of an academic soul would be to risk undoing its spell. This is not merely a common act of overlooking the obvious; those who recognize enjambment as a question, even a low-stakes question, do not seem to feel any particular urgency to answer it. Ron Silliman, in his very brief but also equally edifying and mystifying short essay “Terms of Enjambment,” offers merely that in his own practice of breaking lines, his rule is simply “I try not to use it in the same fashion twice.”<sup>18</sup> William Carlos Williams, despite proselytizing his new orthodoxy of the “variable foot,” nonetheless concedes that lineation in his own verse is largely instinctive:

Why I have divided my lines as I have. I don't know. If I did I'd know the answer to form. I have refused to divide them according to a form I know is NOT the answer. I have attempted to discover, to tentatively feel. Somehow or other the old line must be broken up – somehow. Pleasure, pleasure to the ear is a solid guide. Knowing that we just arrive at formal limits, strict if ample to the end.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Ron Silliman, “Terms of Enjambment,” *The Line in Postmodern Poetry*, ed. Robert Frank and Henry Sayre (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 183. Although it is brief and something of a tour de force that lasts just long enough to rattle our cages, it is a rare instance of a deep analysis of enjambment's role in verse, and is one of the seminal materials of this paper (and received with gratitude).

<sup>19</sup> William Carlos Williams, “Dartmouth College Talk,” C49, Lockwood Memorial Poetry Collection, State University of New York at Buffalo (1945).

Far from the bombast with which he asserts his theories of meter, his own practical philosophy of breaking lines is startlingly humble and rudimentary: in essence, whatever sounds good. For the rest, we must be satisfied with the slippery inscrutability of creative instinct. The vulgate DIY philosophy of the “somehow.” For James Tate, asking about one’s practices of enjambment verges on personal affront: “When people start talking about enjambment and line endings, I always shut them up. This is not something to talk about, this is a private matter. It’s up to the poet.” It is similarly personal for Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, but where for Tate it is an invasion of privacy, for her enjambment is realized within the specific privacy of intimacy, personal corporality, and juvenile punishment, where she finds that the sting of the unexpected line break and its exercise of domination over the movements of the poem’s language registers viscerally with her as a physical spanking.<sup>20</sup>

So we are sent in every direction of the compass when we try to cohere a systematic philosophy of enjambment of among writers and critics, or even a shared sense of its value – mostly we have various definitions and various examples, one nearly as numerous as the other. Nevertheless, enjambment has come to structure the most fundamental of poetic devices (enjambment metaphor and simile being especially common in modern verse), and even if hearing from poets themselves on the subject is not always as demystifying as we might hope, their practice of enjambment often speaks for itself in the value they attribute to it. Two examples follow in which the use of enjambment is foregrounded as the most prominent poetic action of the poem, in verse in which the semantic resolution of the sentence is not in question. Its artifice is laid bare, its trick is

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<sup>20</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, “A Poem is Being Written,” *Representations*, No. 17 (Winter, 1987).

revealed by the authors themselves, and yet this does not diminish its effect upon the reader.

### Enjambment & Permutation: A Limit Case

Perhaps we may define enjambment in part by using a limit case as an example as we begin to tease out its properties. Silliman hits on an important dynamic of lineation-via-enjambment that is perhaps not brought up elsewhere: its capacity to convert the hypotactic into the paratactic – that is, not only to refashion the language of a sentence against the grain of its syntax and grammar, but to nearly completely dismantle (or at least greatly disempower) its linguistic hierarchy.<sup>21</sup> Subject, predicate, subordinate clause, coordinate clause are all jumbled up by line breaks; the natural pecking order of hypotaxis is scrambled so that the egalitarian government of the line may refashion everything into the even breaths of parataxis.

We can see the effect of enjambment with a kind of rare purity in the following two examples, in which three identical sentences or clauses are enjambed differently:

#### **To a Poor Old Woman**

munching a plum on  
the street a paper bag  
of them in her hand

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<sup>21</sup> Silliman, "Terms of Enjambment," 183. "The line is the sole unit of punctuation whose use historically has not been determined by its potential for submitting chains of words to the hierarchic (literally hypotactic) orders of logic which, descended from the classical grammars of Greek and Latin, have become out normative contemporary model for 'clarity' in writing, both in its expository and depictive modes." *Parataxis* here may be a more civilized term for a kind of linguistic anarchy; and yet the clarity that a poem may afford, and that a great many poems do afford, and startlingly so, suggests that Silliman recognizes that to shirk convention and order via the disruptive and subversive properties of enjambment is not to forego order altogether.

They taste good to her  
 They taste good  
 to her. They taste  
 good to her

You can see it by  
 the way she gives herself  
 to the one half  
 sucked out in her hand

Comforted  
 a solace of ripe plums  
 seeming to fill the air  
 They taste good to her

The four lines of the second stanza are simply the same sentence, the same four words (“They taste good to her”), repeated in three iterations, a sentence that returns as the last line of the poem and therefore a fourth iteration. If anything, this seems to verge on writerly faux pas: the poem deliberately parrots itself, recycles its own writing (we’ve heard that one before). In this instance, the poem’s enjambment cannot be accused of withholding itself or suspending its completion *semantically*; it has shown its hand in the first line.<sup>22</sup> The reader knows where you’re going with this. Put simply, the repeated words express no new meaning or information, at least on its surface.

But this is to mistake repetition for redundancy. In an audio recording of his reading of this stanza, Williams gives effect to each enjambment, reading the rotating line endings with emphasis but not haltingly, enough so that each line’s unique music arises and doesn’t sound like a direct repetition of the previous line.<sup>23</sup> In doing so, he performs the effects of the varying enjambments, which surprise us in that what is most unexpected

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<sup>22</sup> William Carlos Williams, “To a Poor Old Woman” from *Collected Poems: 1909-1939, Volume I* (New York: New Directions Publishing Corporation, 1939).

<sup>23</sup> William Carlos Williams, “To a Poor Old Woman,” Poetry Foundation, accessed April 13, 2019, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/play/75392>.

is that the relineation does not herald new sentences or even new words; and yet the line breaks renew the sentence each time, restores some of its force, presents us with a new aspect carefully differentiated from the others. This cannot truly be called “repetition” – perhaps “permutation” would be a more accurate term.

With this stanza from Williams, the repetition or permutation is effective in that it allows the act of eating the plum, the inherent mechanical repetition of biting and chewing, to occupy the entire stanza without identical repetition. The good taste of the plums never becomes matter of fact; the plum’s sweetness is renewed with each bite, as we can imagine the old woman taking hungry bites out of it, just as the line break takes different bites out of different parts of the repeated sentence, just as the reader may hunger over and over for the same strain of language. The repetition of eating is mapped over the verse, until the last line, a fourth instance of the repeated “They taste good to her,” hovers, aphoristic, like the “solace of ripe plums/seeming to fill the air.”

Pablo Neruda similarly relineates the same repeated sentence as the closing stanza in “Explico algunas cosas” (“I’m explaining a few things”).<sup>24</sup> Responding to his critics, who demand to know why he has eschewed his more typical (and less controversial) subject matter of lilacs and metaphysics in favor of writing about state violence, he answers with the force of his own accusation:

Venid a ver la sangre por las calles. streets.	Come and see the blood in the
Venid a ver	Come and see
la sangre por las calles,	the blood in the streets,
venid a ver la sangre	come and see the blood
por las calles!	in the streets!

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<sup>24</sup> Pablo Neruda, *Selected Poems of Pablo Neruda*, tr. Nathaniel Tern (Vintage Books, 2012).



Like the repeated bites of the plum in Williams' poem above, the language here is repeated identically. It is even the more poignant in itself, perhaps, because – like the end-stopped line – the line breaks conceal no surprises: the full sentence (“Come and see the blood in the streets.”) is “prematurely” disclosed, before the poem is through with it. The sentence/line is merely repeated, just broken up differently; yet imagine this end-stopped, without enjambment:

Come and see the blood in the streets.  
 Come and see the blood in the streets,  
 Come and see the blood in the streets!

Flattened thus, the lines lose all sense of the horror of struggling to process the same undigestible fact – murder is rampant; the citizenry are being killed out in the open; the thoroughfares of society have become butchers' galleries. The parallel configuration mocked up above ends up sounding like a ringmaster peddling the spectacle of his show rather than a rhetorical defense against a critic's indictment or a plaintive call to action. Moreover, it would lose the sensation of wrestling with this sentence and thereby wrestling with the reality, the immovability of it, the unsolvability, no matter the approach, no matter how we as readers attempt to enter the sentence and therefore cope with it. The permutating enjambment here gets away with the repetition of mania (you can almost imagine the poet hunched over, rocking in shock and horror) yet also faithfully presents the novelty of the horror before him and the terror he is experiencing.

Moreover, the repetition of the exact language is crucial, because it accomplishes Neruda's task of conveying the irrepressibility of the violence he sees around him, consisting in repeated acts of violence, as well as its insistence as an existential subject; and as if sounding an alarm, he is calling repeatedly upon the reader (presumably not just

the skeptic or critic who is the supposed addressee) for intervention, or at least as a another witness to a crime he cannot help but describe. The poem lands on “blood in the streets,” and, appropriately, cannot move on – formally, aesthetically, morally. But it is the enjambment that keeps it poetry.

Enjambment in both examples above is foregrounded unusually – it is rare that the poet reveals deliberate manipulation of language. And yet despite seeing the trick as it happens and knowing its secret, we are nevertheless taken in by it. The enjambment serves to show us different aspects of the same sentence – “rotates” it, as Heiden puts it. This starts to sound Cubist in presentation, which is in fact a reading of Williams’ enjambed metaphor that Sharon Dolin persuasively argues.<sup>25</sup> Enjambment’s reshaping of the sentence into a new line “creates its own visual and verbal impact,” as Edward Hirsch says, “it declares its self-sufficiency.”<sup>26</sup> He quotes Paul Claudel, who “called the fundamental line ‘an idea isolated by blank space.’” The unique object-ness of the enjambed line as well as the blank space surrounding it will be explored later in this paper, but Hirsch’s suggestion of the autonomy of the enjambed line bears on the sense-making that occurs and convinces us, even when a sentence is deliberately repeated, to make *different* sense of it each time it is enjambed differently. “An autonomous line in a poem makes sense on its own, even if it is a fragment or an incomplete sentence,” he concludes. “It is end-stopped and completes a thought.”<sup>27</sup>

The significance of this autonomy is that it means even deliberately repeated language can function as independent and unique premises in an argument. Neruda’s

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<sup>25</sup> Sharon Dolin, “Enjambment as Modernist Metaphor in Williams’ Poetry,” *Sagetrieb*, Vol. 9, No. 3 (Winter 1990): 33-35.

<sup>26</sup> Edward Hirsch, “Enjambment,” *A Poet’s Glossary* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2014).

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

conclusion in particular is an argument made in permuted lines – the same raw information, but enjambed into distinct premises. When Emerson declares that “it is not metres, but a metre-making argument, that makes a poem,” could we extend this and propose that, similarly, it is not lineation but a *line*-making argument that makes a poem?<sup>28</sup> Both Williams and Neruda in the examples above seem to achieve making a kind of argument through what semantically might be seen as the repetition of the same premise over and over again. The enjambment of the repeated lines makes the argument. Thus the types of arguments are what might make the types of poems, and some are best argued via certain types of lineation, which necessarily includes consideration of the types of enjambment employed – or not employed. If a poem is indeed “a thought so passionate and alive, like the spirit of a plant or an animal, it has an architecture of its own,” this enjambment is part of – if not occasionally central to – this architecture.<sup>29</sup> The thought is structured across the enjambment; the dynamic of enjambment to “straddle or encroach” is part of the structure of the thought. The shape that the poem is pinched into is enjambment’s ideogrammatic function, in Pound’s sense – the straddling or encroaching is really teasing out the shape of the thought. This notion finds support in Olson, whose projective verse called for the shape of the poem to “track, or map, the movement of its thoughts or set of thoughts,” as well as Pound, who thought “a poem was, or should be, the shape of its thought or perception.”<sup>30</sup>

James Tate might appear to be a limit case in the other direction; many of his poems are known for their shapelessness. Enjambment in his verse seems hardly to rise to

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<sup>28</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Emerson’s Prose and Poetry*, ed. Joel Porte and Sandra Morris (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2001), 186.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> Hass, *A Little Book on Form*, 426.

the level of the aesthetic, much less the rhetorical. The remarkableness of his line breaks often is that they are perhaps broken deliberately to be unremarkable, with the effect that the poems come across with the prosy qualities of ordinary speech. But it is a specific margin he creates in that it tiptoes around the potential of explosive enjambments, or even merely provocative or intriguing ones, as this would disrupt the narrative-like flow of his poems.

Yet he does not go so far as to make them prose. My recollection of Tate, both after hearing him read and reading his work initially, was that he was writing prose poems, or at least prose-like poems; but his lineation, his deliberate margin, is a site of careful precision in not exciting the potentialities of breaks that might spin out the poem out of his control. The mundanity of so many of the breaks is no less the mark of a steady shaping hand; the mundane is not naturally occurring, especially in the verse of so imaginative a writer as Tate. Instead, his breaks serve as a kind of negative evidence that proves the capabilities of enjambment even as it rarely, if ever, taps into them.

In “The Cowboy,” for instance, any principle of enjambment appears random, absent, or barely discernable:

Someone had spread an elaborate rumor about me, that I was  
in possession of an extraterrestrial being, and I thought I knew who  
it was. It was Roger Lawson. Roger was a practical joker of the  
worst sort, and up till now I had not been one of his victims, so  
I kind of knew my time had come. People parked in front of my  
[...] <sup>31</sup>

The next word in the beginning of the next line is “house”: no surprise there. Responding to questions about his own practice of enjambment, Tate asserted that he thought of many

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<sup>31</sup> James Tate, “The Cowboy,” from *The Ghost Soldiers* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2008).

of his own lineated poems as prose poems, which might also be no surprise. And yet the end of the poem reveals a subtle hand shaping each enjambed line for deliberate effect:

[...] I felt an unbearable sadness come over me. “Why must you die?” I said. “Father decides these things. It is probably my reward for coming here safely and meeting you,” he said. “But I was going to take you to meet a real cowboy,” I said. “Let’s pretend you are my cowboy,” he said.

It is no accident, after all, that of the poem’s 53 lines, only 10 are end-stopped, including lines ending in a comma. Tate belies his own assertion: this is not prose, or it is verse verging on prose that eventually verges once again on verse. The uncertainty of the conversation plays out in all the line breaks: “Why must,” “probably,” “But,” “Let’s.” “Real cowboy” neatly (and tragically) parallels “pretend cowboy”; and the whole poem comes to rest on the first word of the last line, “pretend,” a good candidate for the poem’s subject, if it has one – an effect that would have been lost had Tate end-stopped the penultimate line at “said” and refashioned the last line as “‘Let’s pretend you are my cowboy,’ he said.”

Type 1: Enjambment that creates a deliberate cognitive blank, which organizes poetic figuration and compels the reader into the poem.

The meaning of a poem can only be a poem, but another poem — a poem not itself.  
—Harold Bloom<sup>32</sup>

In its entry on enjambment, *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* notes that “enjambment can give the reader mixed messages: the closure of the metrical

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<sup>32</sup> Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1997), 70.

pattern at line end implies a pause, while the incompleteness of the phrase says to go on.

These conflicting signals can heighten tension or temporarily suggest one meaning only to adjust that meaning when the phrase is completed.”<sup>33</sup> These mixed messages or conflicting signals are what Sharon Dolin proposes are inherent in a poetics of polysemy – multiplicity of meaning. Since the line breaks mid-sentence, we are unsure how the sentences will be completed; in the opening to Louise Glück’s “Penelope’s Stubbornness,” for instance:<sup>34</sup>

A bird comes to the window. It’s a mistake  
to think of them  
as birds, they are so often  
messengers. [...]

In the first line, the reader makes a mistake – we might think the mistake is the bird’s, in coming to the window; for the literary-minded, we might imagine a bird coming to a window is a canny metaphor for a mistake. Instead “It’s a mistake” reveals itself to be part of an ensuing idiom; although the bird was presented to us as the poem’s first figure, we are now informed that it is a mistake to think of it/them as birds (the repetition of “birds” only serving to further populate the poem with them). Yet these lines are nestled not in a single mistake (or mis-take, taking it for what it is not): the lines cascade through a set of mistakes, a series of meanings that override one another until we reach the end of the sentence – which, as so often with Glück, pleurably proves us wrong yet again. At the end of the first line, it is the bird’s mistake in coming to the window; at the end of the

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<sup>33</sup> *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, ed. Roland Greene and Stephen Cushman, et al (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 435. T.V.F. Brogan, Clive Scott, and Steven Monte are credited for this entry.

<sup>34</sup> Louise Glück, “Penelope’s Stubbornness” from *Louise Glück: Poems 1962-2012* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2012), 346; originally from *Meadowlands*.

second line, it is not the bird's mistake but ours, and the mistake is that we think of them; at the end of the third line, our mistake is not that we think of them at all, but that we think of them as birds; and by the fourth line, the final phase of meaning in the sentence, we discover that our mistake is that we think of them as birds when they are so often messengers. As before, it can be instructive to imagine the prose cognate:

A bird comes to the window. It's a mistake to think of them as birds,  
they are so often messengers.

Over a series of four lines, we are persuaded into four different meanings, four different "mistakes." And while it is the pleasure of the reader to be led astray somewhat, what we are experiencing overall is a richness of language and semantics in opposition to itself that cannot be achieved without enjambment. This polysemy is a common effect of enjambment, deliberately teasing the reader with possibilities of meaning that only resolve at the eventual end of the sentence. Linguistically, this may at times be realized less as a particular word having one meaning or another as the structure created by enjambment bearing the load of a multiplicity of meanings. This can be likened to the linguistic phenomena of "garden-path sentences," wherein a single sentence can be read to be semantically variable – except here, the garden-path is hewn deliberately by enjambment, such that it remaps the language in a way that implicates new orders of meaning and aesthetic.<sup>35</sup>

One way to read this effect is that the semantic variability resulting from enjambment is encoded into the lines themselves as unique verbal objects. It would be

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<sup>35</sup> Manfred Jahn, "'Speak, friend, and enter': Garden Paths, Artificial Intelligence, and Cognitive Narratology," *Narratologies: New Perspectives on Narrative Analysis*, ed. David Herman (Ohio: OSU Press, 1999). "The old man the boat" is a brief example, in which "old" first appears to be an adjective and "man" a noun but logically must be a noun and a verb, respectively.

fair to say that our “mistakes” in reading Glück’s poem occurred line by line, as opposed to word by word, and certainly not sentence by sentence; thus the semantics varied by line. Enjambment creates objects that are indeterminate in themselves, ejected from the system of meaning of syntax; their meaning is constantly being renegotiated in relation to the other objects around them, preceding or succeeding them. This gives the line those qualities less of a unit of language than of an object or artifact of language, something not measured as a quantity of words or syllables but as a discrete thing with its own properties – and, to use Caroline Levine’s canny term, its own “affordances,” which may in fact be largely enjambment’s affordances.<sup>36</sup> The enjambed line is no longer a syllogistic unit in a chain of logic (or not *only* this) any more than we would refer to a particularly memorable melody or even a strain of a melody as a “unit” of music rather than as a musical object. This relational model of lines-as-objects befits Dolin’s view of Williams’ quasi-Cubist line breaks as subverting the hierarchy of the “uni-directional substitution theory”<sup>37</sup> of I.A. Richards’ tenor-vehicle model of metaphor and instead creating a series of verbal interactions, “as though words as objects are interacting with each other in as many semantic relationships as possible.”<sup>38</sup> The interactions, in this case, were to constantly mistake what was being told to us by the poem’s narrator.

But more broadly, this polysemy points to an inherent indeterminacy that is effected by enjambment, something that may not be wholly locatable within the line itself. It is not merely that the text can produce multiple meanings; what is critical is that

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<sup>36</sup> Caroline Levine, “Introduction: The Affordances of Form,” *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015).

<sup>37</sup> Benjamin Hrushovski, “Poetic Metaphor and Frames of Reference,” *Poetics Today* vol. 5, no. 1 (1984), 17-19.

<sup>38</sup> Dolin, “Enjambment as Modernist Metaphor in Williams’ Poetry,” 34.



we are so often helpless to pin down any one meaning. As confident as I may be in my reading of the first line, I must hedge my expectations somewhat until the entirety of the sentence tolls in its final punctuation. Meaning is revealed as deeply contingent upon the orderliness of syntax, its nuclear forces. What the enjambed line does is break apart that order and deliberately create an open text, where the poem's language languishes unresolved at each line break.

Lyn Hejinian sees this openness of a text as essential in ensuring that "all the elements of the work are maximally excited" such that multiple readings and interpretations become available.<sup>39</sup> She, like her forebear Wolfgang Iser in reading phenomenology, note that openness and indeterminacy are created via "gaps" or "lacunae" (or "blanks") in the text which must be filled by the reader, with her own imagination and experience.<sup>40</sup> This indeterminacy therefore occurs where the poem is absent – its gaps or openings – and is thus not the equivalent of an ambiguity in which a particular word is ambiguous on its own. Rather, as Iser proposed, the reading process itself depends upon these gaps; they can be seen in one sense as a byproduct or existential cost of representational art in that the artwork cannot achieve the reality of the thing it wishes to represent (an Austen novel representing Regency life among the gentry cannot recreate the Regency life it depicts, for instance); therefore we, the reader, must supply the rest through a conspiracy of imagination and artwork. In this reading phenomenology,

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<sup>39</sup> Lyn Hejinian, "The Rejection of Closure," *The Language of Inquiry* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

<sup>40</sup> Wolfgang Iser, "Interaction Between Text and Reader," *The Norton Anthology of Literary Criticism* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001). See also Wolfgang Iser, "The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach," *Reader-Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980).

the verbal objects are still crucial to the experience of the artwork, but the nonverbal and the nontextual begin to achieve equal status as elements of poetry.

### Penumbral Poetics

From here I want to explore the possibility of analyzing everything that is *not* the line-as-object. I want to investigate the poetics of lacunae generally – the gaps, the blanks, as uniquely generative forms of enjambment. The shift from lines-as-objects into gaps and lacunae signal a shift into uncharted territory of a kind. The reading “mistakes” we make are not necessarily part of the text; only the most obvious ones are. More unpredictable are the “mistakes” we make that are provoked or incited by the text, but not explicitly. The poem lets us know to seek them somewhere extratextually. Put another way: to what extent are the “mistakes” the *poem*?

Pursuing Morton’s and Shelley’s metaphor for a bit: if the line-as-object is a piece of the Aeolian harp of the poem, then we might wonder to what extent we may prise into the nature of the wind that strums it.<sup>41</sup> The network or matrix in which the object sits may be delineated to some extent by the nature of the interactions that occur between the objects – in this case, how one line interacts with another. Enjambment is less a feature of a single line in itself than a feature of the relationship between the two lines, the way they

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<sup>41</sup> In his essay “An Object-Oriented Defense of Poetry,” Timothy Morton inverts Percy Shelley’s conception (from his *A Defence of Poetry*) of human beings as Aeolian harps to arrive at the conclusion that objects, including poems, may achieve a kind of agency, if not sentience. Though sentience may be difficult to prove (despite the fair likelihood that another source in this paper, cognitive scientist Douglas Hofstadter, might be inclined to pursue that thought), the Aeolian harp-model of poetic agency is instructive in that it implies that the phenomenon of reading relies on a two-way agency – that of the wind and that of the harp. Robert Hass, in various lectures, similarly has described poetry as an “existential breathing apparatus.”

interact, the way they cause mistakes, the way they splinter into multiple meanings. Its agencies are therefore more properly located not within the poem's language (as it is non-linguistic, as opposed to rhyme, for instance, which, though it may abide within the relationship between two or more different words, also is tethered to the character of the very words themselves) but in that space between and surrounding the language, the traversal of the line break, its "straddle"; not within the harp but within the wind that moves it.

The blanks that we fill in during the reading process – visualization, backstory, and of course more than these – patch the indeterminacies we encounter when we read any work. These blanks are a way of hitting on a kind of reciprocal contingency in reading literature, which Elizabeth Fowler eloquently delineates as a sort of mutualism between the work and the reader, each bringing the other to life:

The poem depicts itself as an act of its maker that invites an act from its readers. As an instruction to action, it requires a reader to bring action into being. Poetry is designed for repetition, and placing our voices in the words of the text develops certain shapes in us – shapes of feelings, thoughts, sounds that "were" the poet's. As we take them (or rather make them ourselves in ways he could not entirely have imagined), they become a part of our experience of the world. Acting together with us, the poem shapes our bodies. Directed by it, we make feelings, thoughts, and voices live, and we become accustomed to their shapes, their spins, their suasion.<sup>42</sup>

In my view, enjambment is a device that, more intensely than most others, realizes this reciprocal contingency. It operates via deliberately creating these gaps or blanks – the unwritten space of enjambment, where the reader's mind enters and forms expectations, effectively writing the poem herself – in the moment before the next written

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<sup>42</sup> Fowler, Elizabeth. *Literary Character*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003, pp. 92.

line comes into existence. This may appear to be mere subversion of expectation, but it is much more than that: it is luring the reader almost bodily into the poem, expending some of the reader's presence to activate latent sites of indeterminacy within the poem that the reader may mold, or rather are molded to the reader. The poem's capacity to lure our own presumptions, to have us look ahead down one path and then yank us down another, is but one of these effects, but even it has the power to immediately make the poem personal, to condition attachment.

Louise Glück opens the "The Wild Iris," the first poem in her book, with a radical enjambment. The first line is "At the end of my suffering". Naturally, we would gloss this sentence as "when my suffering was over"; i.e. suffering a disease (ended by its cure); suffering a mortal wound (ended by death); suffering in love (he at last returned my affection); or more mundane or ironic suffering (suffering through exams, suffering from lack of sleep) or existential ("a river, suffering because reflections of clouds and trees are not clouds and trees"). Completing the line's thought by filling in its enjambed blank, we can imagine this in a variety of ways:

At the end of my suffering, I could barely stand.  
 At the end of my suffering, I finally felt at peace.  
 At the end of my suffering, it was already morning.

The first line conditions us to think of the suffering in a familiar fashion, as a process or state that occurs over time. The "end" is a temporal end; it is when the term of the suffering has elapsed or expired. The line implies a "when": it could read "when my suffering had ended." But the next line changes all of that:

At the end of my suffering  
 there was a door.

The “end” becomes a spatial end, like the “end of the road” or a door at the end of a hallway. But the line feeds back upon the preceding line and recursively reimagines not only the “end” but also the subject, suffering – suffering now becomes spatial as well. But our construction of the first line as temporal isn’t outright banished; it’s still hovering there, misconception or not (our mind will never decide this, cannot, because the poem gives precisely the correct amount of lack of evidence), and is superimposed upon the spatial reading, making suffering both a space/body and a time/event. We are surprised to find a door. It is the line break that makes this surprise; moreover, it makes the door *appear*, rather than, as if it had been a line of prose, we might merely accept it, even if we could not see it coming. The appearance of the door is not merely an unlikely logical predicate but an unanticipated linguistic and aesthetic event realized formally through enjambment. We experience the speaker’s surprise, the otherworldliness of the door because it was not expected, because the physics of the first line had not contemplated it and were writ against it. This is the grand paradigm shift of vegetative resurrection (part of the poem’s subject) realized in the poem’s enjambment action: the waking out of the dormancy of one metaphor into another via the straddling of lines.

The interpretation of “end” as temporal is proposed or implied by the language of the line, but it is not explicit or concrete; it is the fallibility or impressionability of the reader that makes it so, and *un-*prepares us for the next line. When this occurs, we are touching, momentarily, the true body of the poem; the thing that the inert written artifact causes to gestate within us. The line is singular; its possible endings are numerous, unpredictable, and ever-changing, such that the shape of the poem and our personal experience of it also changes for us as we gain in knowledge, age, experience, and fill

each enjambed void a little differently. As if it were a singular piece of language, a verb in itself, we “conjugate” the poem. This blank space broken off by verse is where the poem allows all the weather of our beings to occur, where our runaway thoughts may precipitate, provoked by the preceding line. In this manner, each line break functions as a precipice into ourselves.

Out of this, I’d like to suggest a penumbral poetics, a sensitivity to the phenomenon of what lies just beyond the written border of the poem and in the human marginalia that arises from it, as a way of conceiving how verse, in particular through the technique of enjambment, makes itself available for attachment. In this deep sense, we inflect the poems we read, because they invite inflection from us, are built specifically to be inflected thus; are, to some degree, blank for our writing, formless for our shaping. Even the intricately wrought poem is not proof against the reader’s infiltration. Even formal verse, secure behind its battlements of strict meter and rhyme, shares in this formlessness whenever a gap appears in a thought and we may enter the stronghold, bidden or unbidden.

If we accept the notion that artworks contain blanks of necessity, and that the reader is invited to (but in reality, must) fill those blanks simply through the cognitive process of reading the artificial text, the “set of instructions,” then we might also turn our attention to the process by which the reader is filling these blanks; what exactly is being put into the poem. This isn’t simply a matter of the porous hull of the poem that must be patched to glide over the waters of the imagination. But it is patched at the reader’s discretion, and by experience and registers of the imagination that surely vary widely – and perhaps irreconcilably, which interests me greatly – between individual readers. I’m

interested in what this patching consists of; moreover, I'm interested in the attachment that is produced when the stuff of the reader intermingles with the stuff of the artwork.

This is only one mechanism within the range of how enjambment functions, but it may demonstrate how attachment can be generated by a formal operation of the poem, and how attachment perhaps can be located within the marginal space of verse at the line break where the poem consistently hovers between being written and unwritten. The enjambed poem is a deliberately indeterminate form; it is a form created but not enclosed. The blank spaces at the margins, the gaps created by line breaks, have a vast potential that poets, Glück and far beyond, exploit in order to effect their verse aesthetic, to multiply meaning, and to invoke the reader's participation within the poem. Just as much as the poet writes lines of verse (a positive writing), she also writes against a penumbra of all that is excluded by and suggested by the poem (a negative writing). In the case of heavily or radically enjambed verse, the penumbra around it grows and becomes more fertile; in this sense, Glück, Williams, and especially Dickinson qualify as penumbral poets.

Type 2: Enjambment that creates recursion, which effects a non-linearity within verse and makes the line self-referential.

Line ends and especially stanza ends act like magnets. They organize what comes before them.  
Robert Hass, *A Little Book on Form*

Robert Hass hits on a nonintuitive aspect of versification at large: line endings – especially those that are enjambed – exert a backward-moving force throughout the poem. This “magnetic” force “organizes what comes before them”; it polarizes the instant

line, the preceding line, and perhaps several preceding lines, into a type of order that it did not have prior to the trigger of the line end or stanza end. As if in rewind, the semantic sense backflows toward the source of the poem, reforming it, revising it, doubling our experience of it. And all this occurs while we presume we are reading the poem straight, like “normal.” Glück’s un-visualizable “insignia” is retouched in retrospect as a serpent – we won’t make the same mistake on a second reading (but we do; the poem intends this). The cascade of mistakes in “Penelope’s Stubbornness” warrants persistent revision, as we correct the previous line with the new clarity of the succeeding line. Through certain uses of enjambment, a poem causes us to revisit itself, gives the impression to us that it is pondering itself, and so, as it were, preparing us for how to move forward to more surprises.

Similarly, the repeated lines of Williams and Neruda quoted earlier cause the poem to *recur*, as they are baldly recurring language – they make no pretense of it. Yet the poem would end if they were redundant, which is a semantic end of the poem even if not the terminus of the work of art, as the reader is granted no new information; in one sense, the semantic current of the poem halts with the first repetition. Yet Bruce Heiden’s notion of enjambed line breaks as “rotations,” as endings that are also beginnings, implies a circularity, or more importantly a non-linearity, that is the topic of this section of the paper.

In a way, reading a poem from start to finish is perfectly antithetical to a poem’s form and existence. If anything, line breaks in general and enjambment especially purposefully obstruct this act. Unlike prose and unlike end-stopped lines, the reader provides a continuity that does not exist within the poem or enjambed lines themselves.



Reading a poem continuously is nearly the most artificial thing that can be done to it (we might, for instance, compare this to the experience of looking at a painting slowly from top to bottom). We saw how the opening line of Glück's "The Wild Iris" revised itself recursively; subverting the image we had formed in the first line, the second line effectively sends us right back to the first line so that we can revise the ideas and notions we had settled upon. This creates a kind of feedback loop, a strain of semantic noise: Which is it? Is suffering temporal or spatial? What does it now mean to suffer if suffering can have a door? Through enjambment, the poem becomes less of a straightforward affair. Though it will be read and recited in one direction, its verbal effects, its aesthetic, its phenomena do not occur in one direction, or even linearly.

Dolin's notion of Williams' Cubist line breaks also reinforces this: because it breaks down the hierarchy of language and suspends words freely in their relations, the temporal hierarchy of the poem – its beginning, middle, and end, its this-before-that – is also disrupted, flattened, eddying rather than flowing downstream. Dolin cites Williams' writing on Cubism as a corollary to poetic form: the way Williams notices that "one thing laps over on the other, the cloud laps over on the shutter, the bunch of grapes is part of the guitar" correlates to poetic form, "the ability of poetic images written in *lines* of verse to 'lap over' onto and conflict with other images on previous or ensuing lines."<sup>43</sup>

Although Dolin initially approaches enjambments as "a series of visual interactions," she posits that its effect is to dismantle the hierarchy of the sentence and unmoor language such that "words as objects are interacting with each other in as many semantic relationships as possible." For Dolin, this is a stepping stone to a model of metaphor

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<sup>43</sup> Dolin, "Enjambment as Modernist Metaphor in Williams' Poetry," 33. Emphasis in original.

based upon “interaction versus substitution”; but what she has inaugurated more broadly is the possibility of enjambment to suspend lines as verbal objects that are not pegged into a particular order but whose relationship to other lines is one of free non-hierarchical interaction – that is, the lines are not fixed in their relationships to other lines.

But this is only half the story: if the second line sent us back to the first, the poem would only consist of those two lines on a loop. Rather, while it sends us back to the first line, it also sends us forward to the third line – simultaneously. The linearity of the poem still remains, and is perhaps all the more interesting because it is enmeshed in surrounding nonlinearity. The poem recurs at the same time that it also moves forward.

### Recursion and Self-Referentiality

The cognitive scientist Douglas Hofstadter defines recursion as occurring when a thing is defined in terms of itself, or functionally refers to itself.<sup>44</sup> This looping back on itself is an important observation for cognitive scientists: in artificial intelligence, it purports to be the key to machine consciousness; in human beings, a “strange loop” is the source of all subjectivity. Recursion in verse occurs when the succeeding line radically changes the meaning or subverts the propositions or attendant assumptions of the preceding line, causing us to “go back to it,” even if only in our mind; it makes us revise it, or double it, with our prior conception and our new conception superimposed, often in delightful conflict. This creates a two-dimensionality in a one-dimensional reading experience (i.e. reading in one direction, linearly; the temporal experience of the work). The recursion is both semantic (the meaning changes) and temporal (it sends us back to

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<sup>44</sup> Douglas Hofstadter, *I Am a Strange Loop* (New York: Basic Books, 2007).

the preceding line, even as we move forward, reading further); it causes the single line to intersect itself with its twin existences. We see this when the second line of “The Wild Iris” sends us back to the first line, creating a loop. But the loop is not exclusive. The forward movement of the poem overall is taking place as well. The non-linear loop persists as the linear enjambed sentence persists, moving in opposite directions – and, as we’ll see, this also creates a unique temporality in the poem. Perhaps the most important outgrowth of this is that the poem refers to itself, becomes self-referential: the dropping of “there was a door” causes the poem to interrogate its own speech act in its first line.

Recursion has the capacity to make language, which is already referential, self-referential – and in doing so, prods the poem’s language into a new kind of life. Because the line break rigidly frames the language in a line where we can look nowhere else, and where the language itself can look nowhere else, we are caught in this mis-en-abyme of looking; all other language becomes external and thus the referents disappear, out of sight – the adjective only describes itself, the noun only is itself, the verb only is its action, the preposition floats in its own idea. Plucked out of the ordering forces of the sentence via enjambment, and now lacking referent, the line refers only to itself. (Imagine how easily we remember a particular line of poetry, but little of the rest of the poem to which it belongs.) Enjambment turns each line into a strange loop, and perhaps sets off the entirety of the poem (or perhaps clusters of lines with particularly acute or charged breaks) into its own strange loop.

### The End(s) of the Poem

The poem’s capacity for recursion, for looping, for self-reference are perhaps what underpin some of Agamben’s skepticism that poems are really capable of ending

the way other works of art may end. Agamben sees this as due to a logical conundrum centering around enjambment, which he claims as generative of poetry itself – at the end, where there can be “no opposition between a metrical limit and a semantic limit,” therefore “there can be no enjambment in the final verse of a poem.”<sup>45</sup> The poem in fact ceases to be a poem – “if poetry is defined precisely by the possibility of enjambment, it follows that the last verse of a poem is not a verse.” For Agamben, this “disorder of the last verse” manifests “as if the poem as a formal structure would not end and could not end, as if the possibility of the end were radically withdrawn from it, since the end would imply a poetic impossibility: the exact coincidence of sound and sense.”<sup>46</sup>

The enjambed line lacks the resolution of the sentence; we want to know what happens next in order to complete the thought. The line break acts as a hook to the next line, which acts as a hook to the next line, etc. It refuses to resolve itself and therefore keeps us the poem’s captive. This both impels and compels the reader’s experience down the poem while we search and search for resolution that it declines to give us. Sometimes there are false endings (end-stopped lines) and only once is there the true ending, at which point the work of art completes itself. It tantalizes us at every line break with the possibility of its own completion, because (especially as a short form) its ending is what makes it whole, what brings it fully into being, is at last what rounds out our experience. Especially with modern short forms, often we cannot have the first understanding of what is transpiring in a poem until it has ended.

And so Agamben’s idea may not seem so far-fetched. The poem, in rehearsing its own endings in the line breaks, destroys the idea of ending; it safeguards itself against its

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<sup>45</sup> Agamben, *The End of the Poem*, 112.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid*, 113.

own ending/death by making the ending nothing, only a new beginning (line breaks are merely “rotations”). The line break means the ending is a loop: if not to the next line, then back to the beginning of the poem. The line break is not an ending but is instead the very instance of continuation and persistence; in refusing resolution it cheats a kind of literary death, the fatalism of the sentence. Enjambed verse rejects the determinism of the sentence; it is structured from the outset to resist its own ending.

Type 3: Enjambment that creates its own linguistic tense, which is realized as a shift in the temporality of the poem.

Since objects produce time, time as a continuous and smooth sequence of evenly spaced now-points must be *a certain version of time* produced by a *certain set of objects*...  
 Timothy Morton

In researching enjambment, one of the areas of study that would crop up persistently was the field of cognitive poetics, which has curiously concerned itself with enjambment in two main ways: reading cognition of enjambed lines, and recitation of enjambed lines.<sup>47</sup> Although examining the premises of both these fields, as well as accurately representing the depth of the scholarship that has been conducted within them, is beyond the scope of this paper, they both touch on a notion of enjambment that deeply interests me: how enjambment manages a poem’s time.

The idea of “time” in a poem can have various implications. In addition to the familiar dichotomy of narrative time and discursive time, poems have meter, line lengths, and line and word and syllable counts. Within the actual language of the poem, we have

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<sup>47</sup> See, for instance, Reuven Tsur’s chapter on enjambment in *Poetic Rhythm: Structure and Performance – An Empirical Study in Cognitive Poetics* (Brighton: Sussex Academy Press, 2012).

the linguistic tenses represented therein. And, surrounding all this, we have the real-world time of minutes and seconds that is an unfailing backdrop to all our interactions with poems, no matter how much or little relevant that may seem. The time it takes to read a poem  $\neq$  the time it takes to recite it, and it surely does not compare to the time it took to write it. Where enjambment comes into play is first in its traditional oppositional tendency of pitting the line against the sentence – in this case, the temporality of the sentence against the temporality of the line.

so much depends  
upon

a red wheel  
barrow

glazed with rain  
water

beside the white  
chickens

It is probably obvious to even the newcomer to poetry that the word at the end of the line receives a visual (and if read aloud, often auditory) kind of fermata over it, such that it receives not only a type of semantic and sound emphasis but creates a crest and succeeding trough in the cadence of the poem's surrounding language. It also may be clear by now that enjambment engages in a fundamental syncopation between line units and sentence units (or more broadly of sound and sense, as might please Agamben and Hollander). More accurately, this syncopation may occur between different kinds of semantics as well – the sense of the line/stanza and the sense of the sentence. Yet this speaks mostly to the rhythm of the poem, whether musical or cognitive. I would further

posit that enjambment directly affects how the poem moves through time – that is, enjambment is responsible for the special temporality of the poem in verse.

The most simple manifestation of this special temporality is in the deferral of language – the delayed fulfillment of the sentence. The heavily enjambed sentence occurs over a different time scale than its prose cognate; consider the sixteen words in the entirety of Williams’ “The Red Wheelbarrow” above versus the fifteen in merely the first line of Czeslaw Milosz’s “A Magic Mountain”: “I don’t remember exactly when Budberg died, it was either two years ago or three.”<sup>48</sup> Even if read aloud continuously, ignoring the enjambed lines, in reading cognition the pace of the language differs whether distributed vertically or inhering horizontally – whether outwardly palpable or not.<sup>49</sup> Under the conducting of enjambment, subject must wait for predicate, verb must await its object, all at a pace deliberately tuned by the poet so that the poem unfolds just so, at just such speed.

Beyond deferral, critics have noted that enjambment operates in this manner to delay the poem’s gratification, aesthetic and otherwise. In her study of Yiddish poetry, Zohar Weiman-Kelman observes that “patterns of enjambment lure the reader into participation by way of expectation, protracted revelation, and delayed gratification.”<sup>50</sup>

The readers spend the entire moment of enjambment with Odem opening himself up before the speaker; with him, we await her imminent penetration, responding, in fact, to the penetration of her teeth in his flesh. The words of the speaker’s mouth are what create the opening of the enjambment, her physical mouth that seizes the opening for

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<sup>48</sup> Czeslaw Milosz, “A Magic Mountain,” from *The Collected Poems: 1931-1987* (New York: The Ecco Press, 1988).

<sup>49</sup> And as Hass notes, “If you listen to contemporary poets read, you find that some of them give pause to an enjambed line end when there is no breath pause, and some don’t.” *A Little Book on Form*, 420.

<sup>50</sup> Zohar Weiman-Kelman, “Touching Time: Poetry, History, and the Erotics of Yiddish,” *Criticism*, Vol. 59, No. 1 (Winter 2017): 102-103.

penetration. In this moment, the reader's body, too, becomes susceptible to the erotic interaction, to what Carolyn Dinshaw calls "touching across time, collapsing time through affective contact."<sup>51</sup>

She perceives that enjambment facilitates the erotics of the verse, to the degree that it even stages "erotic interaction" on the part of the reader. While this may not have been the type of hesitation or pause originally imagined by Milton, it is persuasive in that it shows the visceral possibilities of enjambment, what is at stake in what we may casually or dismissively regard as pauses, lacunae, absences – in this case, interstices between bodies craving union, maddening delay before erotic fulfillment.

In his "Object-Oriented Defense of Poetry," Timothy Morton weighs in on a poem's temporality by including it within his proposition that objects in fact "emit space and time," rather than merely being situated within them:<sup>52</sup>

It's common to experience time dilating and contracting when we read a story or a poem. We can identify formal narrative techniques and other devices such as ekphrasis that make this happen. We know that form generates time. It's just that we have tacitly accepted the habit of thinking that time and space (and causality more generally) subtend objects, in particular flimsy artifacts such as poems. So we think that how a poem "times" is a superficial coating. OOO reverses this picture. Time, space, and causality float "in front of" objects: they just are ways in which an object appears.<sup>53</sup>

While this paper doesn't move into the ontology of poems, this conception of time may apply to how we perceive of enjambment – how enjambment "times" the sentence, how it affects the way in which the sentence "appears."

A trauma happens "outside time" because it disrupts the habitual currents of temporality. A trauma just is the appearance of a new object. A new

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Timothy Morton, "An Object-Oriented Defense of Poetry," *New Literary History*, Vol. 43, No. 2 (Spring 2012), 213.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid, 214.



temporality appears, because there is a new entity in the world, with its own way of “timing” and “spacing.”<sup>54</sup>

The poem’s “own way of ‘timing’ and ‘spacing’” is likely fashioned around just such devices. With its control over the contours and pacing of the poem, enjambment, above and beyond versification in general, overall creates a proprietary linguistic tense unique to the poem itself. This is a tense that is not realized verbally but structurally and formally; it is the temporal sense of John Hollander’s “sense variously drawn out from one verse into another” in that it both varies and draws out.

But in addition to varying and drawing out, enjambment can also hasten, and can create collisions between sentences through the necessity of caesuras, where two sentences or clauses abut each other in the middle of the impetus of the line. And we explored earlier how a poem can gain recursive qualities through enjambment, qualities that influence the reading process and the pace at which the poem occurs. This non-linearity surely affects the time within the poem as well; recursion sets the clock back, so to speak, in one sense while stretching out the present in another.

The enjambed poem therefore, unique in its distending and division of language, carries with it its own special precinct of time. Its first act is to destroy the timing of the prose sentence. We typically do not read the poem as if it were a horizontal sentence, although this is ultimately a matter of preference and taste. Because neither the language nor the semantics of the poem move in one direction, once lineated, the time that necessarily attends them mustn’t either.

What this leaves us with is an enjambment tense, as if the poem as a whole, through enjambment, conjugates the entire sentence into its unique temporality. The

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid, 216.

temporal order of the sentence, its cadence, its structure, are all re-written via enjambment. The sentence's clock is off; the enjambment tense inflects the language of each enjambed line such that it elapses according to a different period and time signature from what the whole sentence otherwise would. This is not merely "ticked off" by the broken lines, but is a kind of cognitive and performative timing, as we experience in the following stanza from Louise Glück's "Lamium":

Living things don't all require  
light in the same degree. Some of us  
make our own light: a silver leaf  
like a path no one can use, a shallow  
lake of silver in the darkness under the great maples.

Here, the enjambments clearly play with the temporality of the poem – especially in heavily enjambed lines, the enjambment creates a present tense in the poem because the poem gives us the sensation of writing itself or conceiving of itself as we read it. The unresolved syntax over a line break creates a special time for the object of the break: for instance, "a silver leaf / like a path no one can use" suspends the silver leaf in time; it is rendered more fully into the poem's present in a way that it wouldn't be in a prose run of the sentence, a suspension that is the present tense of the poem. Rewritten as "a silver leaf like a path no one can use," as soon as the silver leaf appears, it becomes part of the poem's history; its present has ended. The suspension of enjambment allows all the phases of the suspended word to wax and wane and to ramify and suggest; the "silver leaf" is operating according to the rules of a different type of linguistic tense in the language of the poem.

The definition of “tense” is “a category that expresses time reference with reference to the moment of speaking.”<sup>55</sup> Defined thus, the silver leaf begins to stand outside the normal tense of the poem and leaves off, straining or suspending the moment of speaking – we see this most literally in the complex negotiations one must make in reciting a poem with enjambment, which afflicts no other common verse or prose convention; the nearest troublemaker of comparable or further difficulty would be verse using the page as a visual field, where dispersal rather than lineation is the ordering principle of the text. That enjambment alone muddles the normal *recitation* of a poem itself implies that it implicates its own tense, one that defies to some degree organic speaking; yet it is unique that it is realized formally rather than linguistically (the form of the word does not change, but its placement within the literary form). Enjambment becomes a nonverbal expression of time reference, plucking the word or words momentarily out of the stream of the poem. And it is important to note that it is not a tense that is referenced by language; it is *enacted* by the enjambment. The tense takes place via enjambment, the special time encoded within it; it occurs within the space of the poem – thus hampering its recitation, which obeys the present tense of speaking.

Although enjambment continues to weather disagreement and occasional ambivalence among scholars and practitioners alike, even the most cursory of examinations of its possibilities reveals how rich a source of energy it is for the modern poem. But we must also be clear: the richness of enjambment lies not in the power of a single type of line break, but the presence and interaction of several of these enjambment mechanisms at once. Even in a single line break, we can find recursive properties,

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<sup>55</sup> Fabricius-Hansen, “Tense,” in the *Encyclopedia of Language and Linguistics*, 2nd ed. (online, 2006).

framing properties, temporal disjunction, self-reference. Although this quickly becomes complex, the purpose of this paper has been to propose a handful of new ways in which to think about these enjambment effects and their integral function within the modern poem.

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