

Rope-skipping and Running

How to Think and Talk about Poetic Form



Dr Jeremy Noel-Tod uses metaphors of running, skipping and, perhaps surprisingly, ploughing a field, to explore what's special about the way poets use form. He shows how illuminating these ideas can be by applying them to a poem by Paul Muldoon.

What is the relationship between form and meaning in a poem? Poets have often used metaphors of physical activity to describe the writing of verse, no doubt in part because this is how they experience it: repeating their words over and over to themselves – humming them, even – until they sound just right. Poetic form is, among other things, a kind of game or sport, an exercise in verbal agility. Robert Frost, an American poet from the first half of the 20th century, believed this. He said:

the poet goes in like a rope-skipper, to make the most of his opportunities. If he trips himself up, he stops the rope.

If you want to skip well, you have to respect the rope. Frost's rope, we might imagine, is whatever pattern the poet has chosen to make with words: a poem written to a regular rhythm, maybe, and (or) a regular rhyme scheme. Whatever the rule is, it makes using language trickier than usual. To write a poem, the poet has to play the game and keep the language jumping over the rope.

Not all poets agree about this, however. Frank O'Hara, an American poet from the second half of the 20th century, said that he didn't care very much about traditional formal devices ('rhythm, assonance, all that stuff'). In his view,

you just go on your nerve. If someone's chasing you down the street with a knife, you just run.

O'Hara's metaphor for writing poetry is not a playground game. It's a life-or-death situation, which doesn't care about the rules. 'You just go on your nerve', and do what feels right in the moment.

I find the contradictory tension between these two metaphors of rope-skipping and running – that is, repeating a pattern and doing whatever seems necessary – a useful way of thinking about what poets are really up to when they write. Some are more like skippers, and some are more like runners. What they have in common is their love of nimbleness: they all like to keep language

active, on its toes, and they do this by turning it into verse.

Ploughing a Poetic Furrow

The etymology (that is, the history and origin) of the word **verse** offers us another physical metaphor for poetic form. The Latin verb 'vertere', meaning 'to turn', gave the Romans the noun 'versus', meaning the furrow or line that a plough drawn by oxen makes in a field. At the end of the field, the farmer turns round and makes another line. And this, of course, is what poets do on the page: they plough a little line of words, then turn and plough another one. There is also a word for what happens when they do that: **enjambment**. Enjambment is the term for the visual pause when whatever a poem is saying carries over from one line to another. And, again, the etymology of this word leads to a physical metaphor – it means 'to stride over' (which is why it contains the French word for leg: 'jambe').

An Example – 'The Train'

Let's see how all this works in practice with a short poem by a modern Irish poet called Paul Muldoon (see below right). I think it's a nice balance between a rope-skipping and rule-breaking poem. It's also a love poem about waking up in the middle of the night, listening to a train going past, and wishing that love and life could last for ever. Read it out loud and listen for the rhyming couplets that Muldoon uses to make it sound as though his speaker is trying to make sense of the world by putting everything into neat little pairs.

One of the first things to notice about the form of this poem is that it's all one sentence. So 'The Train' of the title is not just the train out there in the distance – it's also the 'train' of thought in the speaker's head. There's lots of enjambment here: the sentence rolls over from line to line, as the speaker tries to get to the bottom of the thought. And this too is like the train, rolling away, car after car. But the speaker also recognises that these two trains are different. His train of thought lasts as long as a short poem. The train, which seems to be carrying all human civilisation, is set to roll on forever. And this is what worries him: that the train is 'the constant thing', rather than the romantic relationship of two people sharing a bed, which might – and, one day, will – end. This is why the train is said to 'give the lie' to that notion, meaning that it contradicts it.



Looking closely at form, again, can illuminate the meaning of the poem further. The poem has 14 lines, which have been arranged in a shape on the page that resembles what is known as a Petrarchan sonnet: the first eight lines are called the **octave** and the second six lines as the **sestet**. One of the crucial formal features

of such a poem is the silent **volta** or **turn** between these two parts. After the eighth line, what the poet is saying is supposed to 'turn' away from its opening argument towards its conclusion. Muldoon marks this with the phrase 'and then...'. So far, therefore, he is a good little rope-skipper, observing the poetic form with perfect

The Train

**I've been trying, my darling, to explain
to myself how it is that some freight train
loaded with ballast so a track may rest
easier in its bed should be what's roused
us both from ours, tonight as every night,
despite its being miles off and despite
our custom of putting to the very
back of the mind all that's customary
and then, since it takes forever to pass
with its car after car of coal and gas
and salt and wheat and rails and railway ties,
how it seems determined to give the lie
to the notion, my darling,
that, we, not it, might be the constant thing.**

Paul Muldoon



timing. But in other ways, the poem breaks with the rules of a traditional Petrarchan sonnet. The rhymes, for a start, are not all 'perfect' or 'full', and there is an uneasy sense that what is being said doesn't quite fit into the enjambling lines and couplets. Rhyming couplets are usually a form that we expect to say something conclusive, as at the end of a Shakespearean sonnet, where it is used to make passionate declarations of love:

**For nothing this wide universe I call,
Save thou, my rose; in it, thou art my all.**

'The Train' is a love poem, too – a subject traditionally associated with the sonnet form – but that weak rhyme between 'darling' and 'thing' at the end leaves it sounding much more uncertain.

There's also an uneasiness of rhythm. All students of English Literature have heard of the **iambic pentameter**, the poetic form used by Shakespeare to compose his plays. A line of iambic pentameter has an alternating rhythm of five unstressed and five stressed syllables: 'de dum de dum de dum de dum de dum'. A poet who followed this rhythm all the time would be a perfect rope skipper – but also very boring. All of the lines here look as though they might be iambic pentameters, but in fact they

mostly have a less regular rhythm, with only three or four stressed syllables in a line. It's as though Muldoon is deliberately running away from the rope – until, that is, line 11, which suddenly is a full iambic pentameter. And guess what: it's also the line that describes the train going by, with its regular cargo: 'and salt and wheat and rails and railway ties'. De dum de dum de dum de dum de dum.

Why is the train carrying 'rails and railway ties', things which are needed to make more railway? I would suggest that Muldoon here is giving us another clue that the train is also like a poem, with its regular rhythms and rhymes – metaphorically, these are the poem's 'rails and railway ties'. But the train's poem is bigger than the human being's poem: with its vast, impossible cargo of 'coal and gas/and salt and wheat' it seems to symbolise the world itself (Muldoon – who lives in America – has said that he later found out the train was actually carrying orange juice). As the speaker imagines this vast world-train-poem in the darkness, he suddenly feels small. We know this because line 13 is the shortest in the whole sonnet: 'to the notion, my darling'. With only two stressed syllables (notion, darling), it is the rhythmic equivalent of a

whisper after the full-steam-ahead iambic pentameter of line 11.

Poetic form, we might say, is a way of tracing how a speaker is feeling. To quote Robert Frost again, it gives us 'images of the voice speaking'. Poets create speakers and express their feelings by setting up patterns of sound that they can also break for effect: rope skipping and running away.

Dr Jeremy Noel-Tod edited the *Oxford Companion to Modern Poetry* and teaches at the University of East Anglia.

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OPENINGS IN CONTEMPORARY FICTION

Stephen Dilley takes a look at the openings of four books on the 2016 Man Booker Prize shortlist to see how they work, and reflects on how these examples tie in with new trends in contemporary narrative writing.

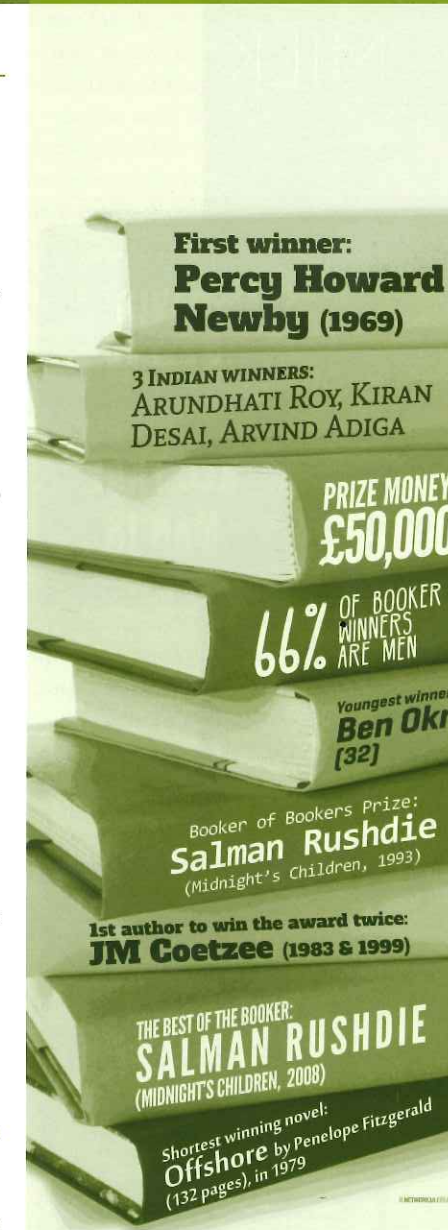
The best openings of novels do more than just introduce plot, character and setting: they allow the writer to tell us something about the kind of novel we are about to read, and the role which they expect us to play as readers. Small details matter in these first sentences. By interrogating the openings of four of the novels from this year's Man Booker Prize shortlist, we can see how writers today set out to challenge and surprise their readers, and how the role of the reader is changing in fiction today.

Paul Beatty – *The Sellout*

This may be hard to believe, coming from a black man, but I've never stolen anything. Never cheated on my taxes or at cards. Never snuck into the movies or failed to give back the extra change to a drugstore cashier indifferent to the ways of mercantilism and minimum wage expectations. I've never burgled a house. Held up a liquor store.



Questions, Challenges and Surprises



Never boarded a crowded bus or subway car, sat in a seat reserved for the elderly, pulled out my gigantic penis and masturbated to satisfaction with a perverted, yet somehow crestfallen, look on my face. But here I am, in the cavernous chambers of the Supreme Court of the United States of America, my car illegally and somewhat ironically parked on Constitution Avenue, my hands cuffed and crossed behind my back, my right to remain silent long since waived and said goodbye to as I sit in a thickly padded chair that, much like this country, isn't quite as comfortable as it looks.

Beatty's satire on American race relations is immediately provocative; as enlightened liberal readers, we may feel a sense of affront at the first-person narrator's initial assumptions about our prejudices ('This may be hard to believe') but the following list of perceived misdemeanours reveals a lighter touch, the use of minor sentences and repeated 'Never' giving it the flavour and force of a spoken voice. This paragraph is full of unexpected juxtapositions as the speaker moves seamlessly between trivial and serious offences. As with all satire, we may laugh at the exaggeration, whilst recognising the angry truth behind it in the context of continuing police shootings, inequality and discrimination.

This list reaches its climax as he describes 'board[ing] a crowded bus or subway car': given the racial context, we are likely to recall Rosa Parks' anti-segregation protest and may feel that we know what is coming next. His subsequent volte-face as he