

FIRST DRAFT #41

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in which Dave Van Arnam says many things off the top, sides, back, and beneath of his head, and thinks about NEW YORK IN '67 and EASTERCON I

Well, here I am, sitting here in the office, working on FIRST DRAFT, and waiting for Lin Carter to arrive...

Hm, well, I've found my copy of SAGANAPILLYCOCKDAGON. "Time was when poetry was supposed to rhyme or otherwise show some evidences of disciplined thought. Now the only difference between poetry and prose is typesetting."

While it is true that there are people writing what they call poetry but who are instead fooling either themselves or their audiences (either deliberately or through lack of perception, on either's part), still, it is also true that there are many poets using the typographic oddities developed over the last 50 or 60 years, quite seriously and with great effect. "Poetry is language charged to the highest degree," Pound quotes someone somewhere. The basis of free verse as a form is that the form of the free verse poem, line for line, is dictated by the stress and weight of the words and word groups. One can write free verse badly, of course; but one can write anything badly.

A few of the poems I've run in FIRST DRAFT I will cheerfully admit in retrospect were written badly. Others, I will not admit were written badly.

As I said in conversation with John, it is not possible to write free verse as prose, if it is truly poetry. Or rather, if a poem in free verse is set as a block of prose, it will not fit. It will not read easily as prose; it will not even read as jeweled, Dunsanian prose. It will simply read awkwardly. It is possible to fool people and take a paragraph of prose and set it up as free verse; but you cannot do this very often and not get caught at it.

You might as well say that a blank verse Shakespearean speech could be set as prose, or vice versa. "I know you all, and will awhile uphold the unyoked humours of your idleness. Yet herein will I imitate the sun, who doth permit the base, contagious clouds to smother up his beauty from the world, that, when he come again, being wanted, he may be more wondered at, by breaking through the foul and ugly mists of vapours that did seem to strangle him. If all the world were playing holidays, to sport would be as tedious as to work. But when they seldom come, they wished-for come, and nothing pleaseth but rare accident. So, when this loose behaviour I throw off, and pay the debt I never promised, by how much better than my word am I? by so much have I falsified men's hopes; and, like bright metal on a sullen ground, my reformation, glittering o'er my fault, shall show more goodly, and attract more eyes, than that which hath no foil to set it off. I'll so offend, to make offense a skill; redeeming time when men think least I will." (H IV, 1, Act 1, Scene 2) That's from memory, but, I think, accurate (don't get stampeded; it's the only speech from WS that I do know by heart). To me, at least, rending that speech as a paragraph produces a singularly unsuccessful-looking

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blotch on the page. The tension of the words is all wrong in the prose format. The whole purpose, or one major purpose, of having a mastery over the blank verse form is to continually play the sense of your words with and against the basic iambic pentameter form.

Of course, this strength gained by counter-stressing against the basic meter does not apply to free verse. But it is interesting to note that much free verse can be scanned as blank verse; it is damnably difficult for poets writing in English to break away from iambic pentameter.

Actually, the question of free verse was thoroughly settled decades ago, and hardly needs any defence these days. I just like to talk about it. As a matter of fact, Lin Carter has been in the office here for about an hour now, and we've been discussing poetry and free verse, among many other things. I quoted John's remark to him, and he pointed out that, among other things, rhyme is a device of relatively recent invention in poetry anyway, and in the case of English was dragged in by the ears from French. Greek and Latin poetry did not use rhyme; nor did Chinese or Arabic. There is no particular requirement for rhyme at all.

This then in English leaves us with blank verse, if we put rhyme away as an unnecessarily complicating device. Now, blank verse is fine, but when you get right down to it, what basic necessity is there to have that left margin thumping into your eye every time you start a new line? It's a printer's device, partly; it enables more poetry to get on a page. It looks neat. It looks logical.

But it's not an absolute necessity. If, then, there is disciplined thought, there is no reason to straightjacket it in outward modes of expression. Time was when the flowery epithet, the gaudy phrase, the overblown rhetoric of Swinburne, or Shelley, or Pope, or however far back you want to go, each had its period in the sun. Should we then still write poetry in the manner of Pope, or Shelley, or Swinburne? Or can we try to continue expanding the limits of poetic expression, and break away from the silly tyranny of rhyme and the unnecessary reliance on blocked left margins...

But it is true that the poet must still have discipline. It may be the discipline he has taught himself -- he knows he can scatter words on the page in any manner, and always be sure of being applauded by some fool, but he also knows that there is only one way of putting words on the page that will satisfy him in relation to those words. He finds he has reasons for what he does. To quote once more a fragment of mine, as demonstration:

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1           but
2 whatever lasts,
3           is a poetry in itself
4           the simple beauty of survival
5           sculpts any rot away

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Line 1 is separate and set in the middle to emphasise that it represents a break in thought, a point at which something new or something summarizing is coming. Line 2 begins the thought, and is set to the left. Line 3 continues the phrase but is on a separate line (tho, you will notice, set one space beyond the comma of the 2d line). Line 4 is not subordinate to line 3, and so is set farther back to the left -- tho it is subordinate to line 2, and so does not go that far to the left. Line 5 is set to the right, as it completes that fragment of thought and shd stand out from the previous three lines. This is not an exegesis of the fragment, but simply an indication that the lines are not placed at random. Consequently, I am hoping you are the sane...