‘Free Verse’ as Formal Restraint

Also by Andrew Crozier

Thrills and Frills. Selected Prose (Bristol: Shearsman Books, 2014) (ed. Ian Brinton)
An Andrew Crozier Reader (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 2012) (ed. Ian Brinton)
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High Zero (Cambridge: Street Editions, 1978)
Duets (Guildford: Circle Press, 1976)
Residing (Belper: Aggie Weston's, 1976)
Pleats (Bishops Stortford: Great Works Editions, 1976)
Seven Contemporary Sun Dials (with Ian Potts. Brighton: Brighton Festival, 1975)
Printed Circuit (Cambridge: Street Editions, 1974)
The Veil Poem (Providence, RI: Burning Deck Press, 1974)
Neglected Information (Sidcup: Blacksuede Boot Press, 1972)
In One Side & Out the Other (with John James & Tom Phillips.
London: Ferry Press, 1970)
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Andrew Crozier

'Free Verse' as Formal Restraint

— an alternative to metrical conventions in twentieth century poetic structure

Edited by Ian Brinton

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Introduction

The summary that Andrew Crozier provided in September 1972 for the thesis which he presented at the University of Essex in 1973 is quite clear in its sense of purpose and this is, of course, of no real surprise. One would do well to recall Michael Schmidt's comments about the glacial progress of Crozier's criticism that I quoted in my introduction to the Shearsman edition of *Thrills and Frills*: 'He is a magnificent critic, moving with the certainty of a glacier, gathering everything.' In the introductory summary Crozier wrote that his intention in writing the thesis had been to cast some light on the *prima facie* case that free verse, in abandoning the exercise of metre, had abandoned that principle of restraint upon which the creation of artistic form depends:

> This point of view contrasts with a general contention on the part of the exponents of free verse that their works possess form which is not only unique but which also bears an immediate relation to the significance of the work, a relationship felt to be "musical", although not in any directly analogical sense.
>
> It is this latter notion of form, implicit in Pound's concept of "absolute rhythm", which I have attempted to elucidate, and I have chosen to do so by considering a number of related earlier discussions of the way in which poetry and music have been thought to be related, rather than by a direct engagement with individual poems. I have been concerned, that is to say, not to undertake practical criticism, but to indicate a poetic theory whence the appropriate standards for such practical criticism can be supplied.

The summary concluded with references both to "the sensible qualities of natural language" and to "modern theories of perception and of nature" and it is perhaps these two thoughts which prompted Donald Wesling of John Muir College, University of California, (author of *Internal Resistances, The Poetry of Edward Dorn*, 1985) to write to Crozier in July 1974:

> "The sensible qualities of natural language": and yet, with the exception of the prose poem, free verse is divided into lines, which create equivalences superimposed on the natural language,

> which coincide or don't coincide with sentences, which therefore supply additional conventions, which therefore profoundly qualify your term "natural language". In general, it may be you under-emphasize the role of the line.

Wesling went on to refer to Crozier's focus upon "modern theories of perception and nature" and suggested that he must be thinking here of A.N. Whitehead whose book *Process and Reality* had had such an influence upon Charles Olson:

> you're here thinking of such as Whitehead, I imagine, for "nature"; but having read in both these areas for a few years, I suspect your documented sense of modern theories of both perception and of nature is a bit thin. Gestalt psychology, directive state psychology, Heisenberg & Bachelard: that sort of thing brings us a bit closer to the present day, though of course the general lines of your account hold up very well.

In the letter Wesling went on to say that as far as he was concerned the constitutive date for modern concepts of form should not be placed around the end of the first decade of the Twentieth Century but at 1795 and that for him the Romantic break was the massive one; Modernism is merely the working-out of a whole new paradigm. He concluded by suggesting that Crozier most certainly had a book here, 'a sensible, lively, contentious, genuine contribution, the best thing on the subject we have so far… the book is there: an achievement: you should publish it soon.'

The official academic centre for Crozier's doctorate was the University of Essex where he had both studied and taught in the new Department of English and American Studies, founded there by his former teacher Donald Davie. Whilst there between the autumn of 1965 and the autumn of 1967 he not only started editing *The English Intelligencer* but also, along with Tom Clark, *The Wivenhoe Park Review*. The review continued under the title *The Park* when Crozier moved in 1967 to the University of Keele after he had taken up a lectureship there in the Department of American Studies. He remained at Keele until 1973, the date in which he was awarded his Doctorate, before moving on to the University of Sussex where he remained until his retirement. Throughout the time since he had left Cambridge he had kept in close correspondence with Jeremy Prynne and had organised the publication of *Brass* with Ferry Press in 1971[1].

Crozier's connection with Wivenhoe Park re-emerged in February 1972 when Prynne wrote to him about their mutual friend, Douglas Oliver, who had applied for admission to the literature course at Essex. Prynne was wondering at this point if there was anyone still at the university whom Crozier might have known and who might put in a word for this mature student. Crozier replied to say that 'My contacts with Essex have been minimal since I left the place… However, my current supervisor, Herbie Butterfield, seems to be fairly well disposed towards me, and I'll write to him about it. I suppose the one virtue of Essex would be that they might leave Doug alone.'

In March 2013 Tony Frazer wrote to me concerning Crozier's thesis, having heard about it from Kevin Nolan. He wondered if it was something 'that could be rescued'. It has been and I must acknowledge my debt to Jean Crozier for permitting it to be published. This edition of the thesis also contains the examiner's report written by J.H. Prynne whose concluding note to Crozier is itself of interest:

> "The analysis of the Williams poem is perceptive and convincing, but it makes no direct attempt to give a specific account of what a prosodic description would have given, i.e., some non-arbitrary indication of its line-divisions etc. If Crozier reasonably refuses to invoke any a priori formal expectations, he might also (reasonably) be expected to refer to just those features of poetic ordering which prosodic analysis would have dealt with, to shew that his own approach is (a) adequate, and (b) non-reductive."

Ian Brinton

Notes

[1] The details surrounding the publication of *Brass* can be found in an article 'Andrew Crozier and the Ferry Press' by Ian Brinton, *Tears in the Fence*, No. 55, Summer 2012.

‘Free Verse’
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Summary

My intention in writing this thesis has been to cast some light on the *prima facie* case that free verse, in abandoning the exercise of metre, has abandoned that principle of restraint upon which the creation of artistic form depends. This point of view contrasts with a general contention on the part of the exponents of free verse that their works possess form which is not only unique but which also bears an immediate relation to the significance of the work, a relationship felt to be "musical", although not in any directly analogical sense.

It is this latter notion of form, implicit in Pound's concept of "absolute rhythm", which I have attempted to elucidate, and I have chosen to do so by considering a number of related earlier discussions of the way in which poetry and music have been thought to be related, rather than by a direct engagement with individual poems. I have been concerned, that is to say, not to undertake practical criticism, but to indicate a poetic theory whence the appropriate standards for such practical criticism can be supplied.

Accordingly, I have first of all examined the kind of critical reservations to which free verse is susceptible, and I have in turn discussed the notions of restraint implicit in metre, together with its associated formal concepts. These suggest a notion of form as the product of two contending principles, in contrast to the notions of formality associated with free verse, which suggest, rather, the cooperation of several distinct principles working in a similar direction. These principles resolve themselves into issues concerning the melodic structure of the verse line, and the way it is shaped by real speech values.

I then turn to the question of antecedent exponents of a relationship between poetry and music; music here being a term which extends to deal with the construction of the verse line as an authentic unit. From the sixteenth century onwards, preoccupations of this type have concerned themselves both with the purely formal or technical organisation of verse, and also with the question of its expressive powers. A concept of universal harmony, of relationship by significant proportions, has underwritten critical speculation of this type, although its power to do so has diminished as the scope afforded to the notion of reason has been narrowed down to suggest that it is an exclusively mental quality. Thus my central narrative exhibits a decline in the coherence of speculation of this type from Cam-

pion's suggestion that the ear is a rational sense, to the agitation of the passions by mechanical association in Addison and Burke.

My final contention, therefore, that free verse embodies an authentic formal principle guided by the restraints imposed upon expression by the sensible qualities of natural language, and that such verse is amenable to criticism according to its own appropriate criteria, which I define, is sustained by an argument against such a restriction of rational function, together with the suggestion that modern theories of perception and of nature encourage us to understand a nature in which rational structure inheres, so that the restraints afforded by language to verse form are not merely arbitrary, but are consistent with potential meaning.

Chapter 1

Introduction: Critical Reservations About "Modern" or Experimental Poetry

It is generally acknowledged that round about 1908 English poetry began to undergo a series of radical changes and there exists by now a considerable critical literature charting and describing this process. By and large the various accounts given of "the new poetic" or "modernism" concern themselves with a range of potentially verifiable historical data: the formation of the Poets' Club, the publication of the Imagist "manifesto", the critical ideas of Hulme, Pound, and Eliot, and so on. These data provide an ambience against which the work of various poets of now established reputation can be observed; Yeats and Pound, Pound and Eliot, are seen to influence one another's work reciprocally, yet at the same time may be treated individually to present particular bodies of work which can be dealt with in a conventional critical way. It is difficult to avoid the impression that in most discussions of this complex and important period of poetic activity the idea of the "radical change" which so often serves as a premise to frame discussion is, in fact, held to be the feature of least importance.[1] It appears to be a rather elastic concept, allowed a fairly definite commencement, but with no real terminus, something which exerted its ghostly presence throughout the composition of Pound's *Cantos*, perhaps, but effectively redundant by the time *The Waste Land* was published. I am aware that from this point of view I may appear to be guilty of asserting a mere quality in the face of the superior claims of substance, by harping on the question of a radical change, its real nature, the extent to which it might be a gradual process, and whether such a process might not be still unfolding. One of the implications of such questions is that, unless "modernism" can be seen to be something which transcends the individual poetic achievement of a Pound or an Eliot, something therefore which can be generalised in terms of, for instance, common poetic procedures or attitudes of a sort which make a significant contribution to individual poetic achievement, I can see no point, given the advantage of half a century of hindsight, in attaching particular importance to the events of 1908 and thereabouts, no matter how radical or novel the actors in those events might have felt

they were being. It would seem, rather, the proper critical task to reabsorb those events to the steady, evolutionary march of English poetry. There exists, after all, ample precedent for such a procedure in the secondary writings of T.S. Eliot.

The set of attention from which the argument of this essay derives reached back to 1963, when I was still an undergraduate, and takes as its point of departure an acceptance at face value of the premise that a radical and self-consistent transformation did occur in English poetry at the beginning of the present century. The idea of the self-consistency of these events is of particular importance, for I believe they need to be seen not as a single and absolute occurrence, but rather as a movement at work on a number of different and complementary fronts, possessing, moreover, important correlations with areas of knowledge and activity which are not normally regarded as falling within the scope of literary criticism. The idea of such a radical transformation possesses a certain inclusive interest by virtue of the way in which it can be made to offer both an explanation of how the poems to which the idea refers work at various different levels, and also an injunction that these levels, in any given poem, should work together in a complementary and consistent way. Such a formulation, which might amount to a poetics, since by extrapolation it might be held to apply normatively to any poem, is not, of course, anywhere explicitly worked out; nor, I think, is it to be found fully embodied in the work of any one poet. Indeed, various poets whom I regard as participating in this process of radical transformation have published statements which patently oppose the drift of my argument. What I am proposing here is, in fact, double-faced, both description and formulation, a projection of ideas about the present status of poetry in order to cast light upon the radical core (vortex might well be a more appropriate word to use in this context) of the events of 1908 and subsequent years—events to which, through my knowledge of them, I largely owe the ideas being entertained.

It should be clear by now that my diagnosis of the character of this process of radical change does not relate simply to ideas of formal poetic innovation on the one hand, and on the other to the revival or reaffirmation of certain poetic universals: twin purposes which some "Imagist" statements imply were the sum of the innovative concerns of that particular literary moment. I want to emphasise this from the start, since otherwise my working procedure might be taken to suggest an exclusive concern with the first of those propositions. What strikes me as a salient feature of the movement I am trying to define is not so much ideas about

the “image” or the “ideogram”, but something more fundamental still, the use of asymmetrical verse structures, a whole range of compositional strategies to which the title “free verse” has at best loosely, and in general uselessly been applied. My attention has focussed initially, therefore, on those areas of poetic activity which are referred to under such headings as prosody, metrics, rhythm, verse structure, and so forth. This is already in practice a sort of conceptual no man’s land, in relation to which no set of descriptive terms can pretend to be critically neutral. I have found in particular that systems of metrical scansion fail to meet the case presented by the kind of poem which concerns me here. In effect, most prosodic or metrical _systems_, including their notational signs, turn out to offer what is essentially an account only of the examples they use as illustration. It seems to me more pertinent, rather than search for a complete account of rhythm as a feature of poems which can, by implication, be relegated to a subordinate position in the hierarchy of poetic effect, to see the study of prosody as an investigation of rhythm as something which makes a fundamental contribution to an _inclusive_ poetic effect. From this point of view rhythm in poetry can be seen as something with a variable function rather than a specific modality or level.

Two related purposes are hereby brought into play: first, to offer terms for the perception of rhythmic activity in a poem, and second, to offer an account of the way rhythm cooperates in generating the total significance of the kind of poetry being dealt with here. In each case I have found that the analogy between poetry and music put forward so energetically by Ezra Pound could be illuminatingly followed back over four centuries of speculation about the ontological status of poetry. Moreover, whereas for Pound the analogy consisted chiefly in observed structural parallels between the temporal operations of poetry and music, so that he often seems to be offering little more than a sophisticated version of the Rhymers’ Club obsession with the sung lyric, there is an important earlier literature of the relationship which opens up much fuller and more interesting possibilities. Thus, although for the Sixteenth Century theorist there was a potent nexus between poetry and music, as arts composed of time relationships, these issues were also bound up closely with the whole question of the availability and value of the vernacular tongue for literary composition; and while this temporal nexus is a recurrent issue, reappearing in a particularly interesting way in the work of Patmore and Hopkins in the middle years of the Nineteenth Century, the curve described by this fructive mental association of music and poetry is sufficiently encompassing to take in,

during the Eighteenth Century, a series of comparisons between the sister arts in terms of their related expressive powers rather than their structural affinities.

For poetry which dispenses with a priori notions of form, or a given metrical base, the analogy between poetry and music offers a valuable model for our understanding of rhythmic presence and complexity. What it does not offer, however, and what should not be expected of it, is any explanation of how the rhythm which is defined in this way operates with and, perhaps influences other elements in the poem—syntax, grammar, reference, and so forth. How it does this is the question of determining importance, and needs to be approached from a different direction, that of the general ideas one has of the nature and purpose of poetic discourse. If it can be assumed that there is a significant correlation between formal metrical schemes and statement in the form of a sentence which can be parsed throughout according to agreed grammatical procedures, it should be possible to invert such an axiom to apply to a case whereby, if the conventions of former apparatus are altered it will follow that the conventions in the latter may alter in a significant way also, so that one will find, not the abrogation of the grammatical laws necessary for meaningful and verifiable discourse, but a transformation both of the world which is implied in any particular instance of verbal structure, and by the same token a transformation of the rules for organising language which are to be inferred from any such implied world. This means that a poem might effect a transformation of the culture of which it was in part an expression. The intellectual underpinnings of this argument, obviously enough, are not to be drawn from literary history, but derive instead from such disciplines as linguistics, anthropology, and metaphysics. I feel very simply that these matters lie outside my competence; indeed many of the specific issues to which I might refer are controversial within their proper fields, and it will therefore be with reluctance that I refer to my superficial reading in such matters. Where I do so I hope it may be not to put forward a point to sustain my argument, but rather to indicate the broad-ranging reference which I think poetry entails. Many of the poets whose work I shall be discussing have, in fact, made excursions into these fields in the course of commenting on the nature of their poetic activities, and so it should be possible to register these extra-literary concerns as a metaphor for the scope claimed on behalf of the poetry I am discussing. In this way, I believe, the argument can be made to remain within the traditional territory of the literary critic.

I wish now to discuss briefly the ideas of two poets who have written extensively about the mode of discourse of modern poetry and its relation to prosodic structure, since the arguments they put forward run counter to ideas which must remain implicit during much of my subsequent argument.

In his book *Articulate Energy, An Inquiry into the Syntax of English Poetry* Donald Davie asks "What is Modern Poetry?", and suggests that it is a derivative of *symbolisme*, a special way of organising symbolic events to such an end that, in a phrase taken from Marshall McLuhan, "syntax becomes music."[2] What Davie understands by music here is not very much to the point, although he appears to harbour a rather dim judgement of it, suggesting elsewhere in the book that in poetry "music" or "sound" is a property which enables the poet to spin his work out to the detriment of sense. By syntax, however, Davie means something quite precise—it is the syntax which satisfies the demands of the logician and the grammarian, and also of the "folk", "authentic" syntax in fact.[3] Against this he sets a "modern" usage of syntax, or pseudo-syntax, which makes of it merely an "emptied form", which can harbour, nevertheless, "presented" experience. (There is a strange elision in the topics Davie is dealing with at this point, from symbolic event and *paysage intérieure* to a modern use of syntax as a handy convention to provide a presentational framework for concrete experience, which is what I take him to be discussing subsequently.) Davie makes considerable play with the distinction between "presentation" and "description", while at the same time deprecating it as a point of controversy. The crux of his argument, however, involves a passage of Coleridge's in which, as Davie sees it, an analogous distinction is drawn between the "imageable" and the "conceivable".[4] What Coleridge is intent upon, in this distinction between different modes of mental projection, is an oblique attack on the sensationalist axiom that nothing can be in the mind which was not first in the senses; the "imageable", that is to say, standing for the processes of tangible sensory experience.[5] Coleridge is recommending what amounts to an operational procedure which will discover for the transcendental notions about the presence of innate ideas ("the conceivable") their proper station in mental life. For Davie, however, "This is the Coleridge who admonished Wordsworth that the best part of human language comes from the allocation of fixed symbols to internal acts of the mind." Allowing for the apparently pleonastic condition of internal here, these acts of the mind appear to embrace both the power of generalisation and conceptualisation, together with the formal rules of logic and grammar, which seem to have been endowed with a stiff immutability at this point.

The phrase does not however, as Davie uses it, refer to either involuntary or mechanical mental activity, or that range of mental states and processes which for convenience's sake only can be denoted by the term irrational.

I am not happy about the particular grounds upon which the argument about pseudo-syntax is conducted, nor, I think, is Davie himself, for he does not seem prepared to offer any answer to the question which he originally posed.[6] What in fact appears to be at stake for him here is not simply the bleak future for formal syntax (which I should prefer to denote by the term "grammar") and the conceptual impoverishment of symbolic presentations; of much greater importance must be the notions about knowledge, truth, and meaning in relation to poetry which are brought into play by his argument. The goal of modern poetry, it seems to me, entails the accomplishment of a self-verifying and self-validating discourse, which does not need to refer to an ostensive reality separate from itself in order to establish the possibility of its own existence. This sort of proposition can, of course, easily be corrupted to turn into a case made for language as an absolutely expressive system, a kind of poetic hermeticism which cancels at a stroke a further modern goal, the return of poetry to a direct presence in the world, and it is this easy tendency which must, I imagine, have been at the back of Davie's mind as he wrote the passage I have been discussing. But by using Coleridge's term the "conceivable" to conflate two distinct notions, the transcendent idea, which manifests itself to the poet through nature, and the concept, the complex idea formed internally by the mind out of the simple ideas of sense data, Davie has implicitly left the poem bifurcated uneasily between natural and human worlds, neither one nor another. (It is as though, for Davie, "presented" experience can only occur in a singular manner, reminiscent of the atomism of Locke's sensationalism. And that a complex or gestalt can never be "presented" to experience with the same "directness". I should imagine that modern theories of perception would undercut any notion that the minutiae of sense data possessed a superior intensity as knowledge.)

Davie's argument, in effect, only shelves the important questions about the relation between poetry and language, and between language and human experience. Davie seems to assume a radical discontinuity between the natural and the human worlds, but because in this respect he is only typical of an anthropocentric culture, he is not required to make the assumption explicit, and it is difficult to hold him to the point for the purpose of discussing an assumption about the relationship between these two "worlds" which is, I believe, basic to the poetry I am going to discuss. This assumption is, crudely stated, that there exists no radical discontinuity

between the human and natural worlds, but that, on the contrary, man exists as part of a nature to which he owes his fullest existence. (It is a point of view put forward with particular emphasis by Charles Olson in his essays "Human Universe" and "Projective Verse".[7]) If man, and, what is more to the point in the context of the present argument, language also are part of the natural world (it should be noted, in passing, that such a view need not commit one to the assumption that language is therefore simply a mechanical operation, devoid of intentional structure) then it should follow that what Davie means by his concept of "pseudo-syntax"—a conventional form drained of rational structure since it only contains bare and undiscriminated, therefore meaningless and presented, experience—is nothing more than a discrimination of sensibility. Whatever its character as syntax, any manifestation of linguistic organisation is nevertheless meaningful, since linguistic apprehension and rendering of experience need not require any logically prior and separate act of evaluation, the point being that the notion of priority at work here, non-verbal experience giving way to evaluated verbal expression, has become tautological. (Again, this view does not commit one to the naïve view that the structure of language is somehow mimetic of the perceived relations of the external world; on the contrary it is a view which should be able to utilise Chomskyan notions about the "deep structure" of grammar.) I am sure, to draw into discussion at this point a poet whose work implies that view about man in his relation to nature of which I have suggested Charles Olson is an exponent, that this is one of the implications of William Carlos Williams' axiom "No ideas but in things"—a praxis of naming which carries the thing named over into the act of discourse, which suppresses, in other words, the need for the middle ground of a lexicon of generic concepts, or words, which mediate between simple naked facts and our ability to discriminate between one such fact and another. It is not that I dispute whether, in certain circumstances, words exercise such a character of generic abstractness; or that the situation of the lexicon possesses this kind of logical middle ground; what I do question is the view that all operations in language stem from and have their functions defined by such a source. However, in trying to clarify these reservations I have allowed myself to run on a bit too fast, leaving unexamined the assumption which I have suggested underlies Davie's argument at crucial points. This assumption about the separation of man and nature is explicitly advanced by Yvor Winters in his important book *Primitivism and Decadence, A Study of American Experimental Poetry*, first published in 1937.