

Creative Indifference

By Rod Jellema

I've just read Marianne Boruch's essay "Line and Room" from her book *In the Blue Pharmacy*. It's a fascinating excursion into the many ways that *line* functions in the total makeup of what a poem is. We understand how poetry's pressure and classical restraint are strengthened by lines that use punctuation marks at their ends, letting sense and meter pause in between so that each line functions clearly as a unit in a structure. But much more excitingly, Boruch demonstrates the gain in breadth, movement, and complexity when a poet breaks lines using enjambment—letting the language flow or jerk, hush or clamor, set up tensions, and surprise us as the lines run through the end-stops. She freshens an old truth: that the line is a unit not of sense but of attention.

By essay's end I felt enriched and even energized. And I wondered, as I often do, why I tend to escape from discussions of craft, even such insightful ones as this. As teacher, workshop moderator, and poet, I have stayed on the sidelines while the lit. crit. discussions moved on. Why have I been willing to be embarrassed by my ignorance of prosody and other formal matters? I must confess right here that I drifted off now and then even while reading "Line and Room"—but at those moments of inattention, something significant was happening. I was beginning to realize why. Something in the essay was, like a low cello in a fugue, leading me away from what the lead violin was doing.

The undercurrent to what I was reading was a persistent resonance from Boruch's opening illustration. She had begun with severely deaf Thomas Edison, who (according to his diary entries) found all through his life great "value" in what he'd luckily lose by not hearing it. The boy Edison as a telegraph operator, deaf to his surroundings, heard each clicking message through a flow of starts and stops. His hearing, Baruch notes, became not DC but AC—responsive to, let's say, lines using enjambment rather than end-stops. And from then on, his productivity flourished only in the silences he loved.

But this far into Boruch's essay, I noticed that I was floating with Edison's prized deafness rather than taking in further illustrations of the power poets gain by shaping their lines. I was getting more out of Edison than Boruch had intended. I was discovering something about myself as teacher and poet—that it's not intellectual laziness or torpor that had kept me from studying and teaching prosody. I had found what is, for me, a valid shortcut. Whimsically aligning myself with Wordsworth (*wise passivity*) and Keats (*negative capability*), I'll call it *creative indifference*. I mean simply that we readers, teachers, and poets can ignore much of the hum of critical discussion while we work with the wonders of creative process.

I've always wondered why James Wright agonized so over his divorce from the iambic—as though he were violating a pledge and joining thieves and hoodlums. Donald Hall says that Wright, even after the big turn in his work (*The Branch Will Not Break*), would

sneak off and secretly slip back into iambic lines. He had possibly the best ear of any poet of my generation—so *Just write, Jim*, I would have said to him, *Write, alert only to the working of sounds and undertones and cadences as you make them*. Or let's take Gerard Manley Hopkins, a thorough scholar of prosody as he studied it in classical Greek, Welsh, and Anglo-Saxon, fussing and fussing with scansion—all those little x's and accent marks—so that readers could hear what he called “sprung rhythm.” *Well, yes, Father Hopkins*, I would have said to him, *That's correct, but just go on making—just keep trusting always your ear and often the Holy Ghost as you write*.

Why should poets wrestle with and explain what works? Hopkins once touched on this, simply and (for me) unforgettably: apologizing to Robert Bridges for the oddness of his work, he adds: “*but read it with the ears . . . and my verse becomes all right*.” In other words, pay attention to the undercurrent.

This is a little like Thomas Edison's hearing (as he said) only what he needed to hear and nothing else. I would read Hopkins aloud to my students, prompted by my ear and ignoring the squiggles (which I never tried to explain), and they got it. They experienced the sprung rhythm and the Welsh “chiming” and the Anglo-Saxon-inspired alliteration; they got it not as puzzled-out, analytical brainwork but as the works, the workings, the essence of a highly charged poetry. They learned to find what's working in poems and then to marvel at the how of it, catching words and movement. That's real reading. Direct reading.

So maybe it turns out I wasn't lazy—shamed by all those scholarly analyses I never read! Maybe I was only being respectful of poetry's immediacy, teaching by showing that immediacy rather than identifying its machinery, its means. Right now I feel exonerated by all people that unschooled laboratory putterer who'd never had a course in high school physics, Thomas Edison.

And speaking of puttering: with *creative indifference* to the intellect's insistence upon explaining things, the poet in me kept writing, mostly for the ear, breaking lines by hunch, writing to see where the writing would take me. Nothing great happened; it kept me tuned to the students. While I can be stirred by Marianne Boruch's analysis of Robert Lowell's little masterpiece poem “Skunk Hour” (her essay and the poem together should be required reading), something tells me that Lowell did not consciously design and work the machinery of those startling moves and line breaks. He invented them as he wrote the poem. He might have agreed to the presence of something like *creative indifference*. I have to believe that if I'm to keep trusting my notion of the shortcut.

Writing poems is not exactly like sparking something through copper wire to catch and hold light, or making a voice vibrate a steel needle into graphite to record it, but I'll take either of these as keenly exaggerated metaphors. You see how I'm warming more and more to Edison. As well as poets, I have readers in mind—and a calmer way for them to experience poems. Both can enter a working creative process that, while engaged, is deaf to the conscious intellect's distractions about rules and tools. (Presumably the poet has, in

the final drafts, checked the workings of poetic machinery—and possibly added something to them.)

Edison couldn't know if the voice would rise out of the graphite until he gambled a lot on the way to trying it. Poets at their best let word, image, and sound lead on to word, image, and sound as they find a shape and a fitting cadence. They nudge the lines toward crystallization. Readers can follow. This is the sort of thing I've always said to students and have learned to say to myself. Now I'm saying it louder, with reinforcement from lonely, silent, productive Thomas Edison.