

LISTENING AT THE EDGE OF THE LINE

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ABSTRACT

To be listening, according to Jean-Luc Nancy, is 'is always to be on the edge of meaning'. How do we listen to a poem's edge? To the end of the line? This essay thinks about line endings and how they invite our listening. It explores the acoustics, dynamics, and somatic experience of line endings in the works of a number of poets, including Alice Oswald, Kathleen Jamie, William Wordsworth, and Jen Hadfield. It draws on Nancy, Denise Levertov, and Rita Dove's thinking about line endings, and offers a series of amplified close-listenings which open up wider thinking about how we read and experience poetry. This is part of a larger exploration of what it means to listen to a poem — to the sounds a poem remembers, to the sounds a poem makes — on the page, in the air, in the ear — but also to the spaces, to the gaps and pauses, to the white space at the end of a line.

How do we listen to a poem? To the sounds a poem remembers, to the sounds a poem makes — on the page, in the air, in the ear? How do we listen, not only to its words and rhythms, but also to the spaces, to the gaps and pauses? To be listening, according to JeanLuc Nancy is 'is always to be on the edge of meaning'.¹ How do we listen to a poem's edge? In a lecture about Ted Hughes at Oxford in 2020, Alice Oswald describes the end of the poetic line as a white space, as a listening space: 'A good poem gives up its knowingness at the end of each line, inhales, listens and then starts again'.² The end of a line is figured as a moment of breathing, and of listening; the poem itself is listening, listening out, into the silence, into the whiteness of space; listening out for what will happen next. Teaching poetry, the first thing I do, the first thing we do together, is to listen. Someone reads the poem out loud, and we listen together. Listen line by line. Listen to the white space at the end of the line. What difference would it make if the line ended at a different point, after a different word? How would it sound, how would it move, with different lineation? Or with no lineation, as prose? What are the pressures on a word at the end of the line? Is there a stress or rhythmical emphasis? Or does the syntax invite us to move fast across the line end to complete the sense, so that the line ending is quieter, less emphatic? Does the line end resist the grammatical and syntactic unfolding of the sense of a phrase or sentence? What does this resistance feel like when you hear it? When you read it aloud? Or perhaps the line end completes a unit of sense. What kinds of words sit at the end of the line? Are they verbs? Or prepositions? Adjectives or nouns? Do these last words direct us, invite us, slow us down? Do they ask us to look, to question, to search out? What difference does the kind of word at the end of a line, the part of speech, make to the way we hear and the way we move from one line to the next? The line is a unit of sense and a unit of rhythm. Sometimes it is also a unit of rhyme. How do sense and breath and rhyme work together, or against one another at the line's end? Is there a feeling of completion? Or is there a sense of want or desire? Does the end of the line leave us hesitating? Questioning? Does it open up ambiguities? Does it seem to mean or suggest one thing, and then, when we read the next line, is it changed, retrospectively, in tone or sense or emphasis? Is there punctuation at the end of a line? How does that modify the sound and the sense of the line, the way we move across the line to the next? How do we breathe at the end of the line? Do we stop to breathe? Do we breathe differently at the end of an end-stopped line compared with at the end of an enjambed line? And if the poem is rhyming, how does it feel at the end of a rhyming unit when the rhyme is satisfied, when it is closed and completed, compared with sense of anticipation, the desire, set up by the opening of the first rhyme? The first thing is always to listen, to read the poem in silence, listening with the mind's ear, and then read the poem aloud, listen, and listen again. At the end of her sonnet 'Wood not yet out' (2008), Oswald describes her own listening, and uses the opportunity of the line's end to shape our listening:

once in, you hardly notice as you move,
the wood keeps lifting up its hope, I love

to stand among the last trees listening down
to the releasing branches where I've been –
the rain, thinking I've gone, crackles the air
and calls by name the leaves that aren't yet there³

The end of the line is a visual as well as an aural experience. How do eye and ear work together at the end of the line? In these lines, and in many of Oswald's poems, eye and ear work together and askance in playful ways. Here, the position of that phrase listening down at the end of the third line invites us to listen and to look down into the white space and down to the start of the next line, to the releasing branches. That unexpected preposition down in listening down gives direction to an act which is not usually described in this way: we don't usually listen down the lane as we might look down the lane, or look down the page, more usually we listen to or for something, sometimes listen up, or, perhaps, we might just listen. Listen to the poem's rhymes — to the half rhymes — move and love, down and been — their not quite rhyming leaves a space — an opening, before the concluding full rhyme of air and there. But although air and there rhyme, the couplet works against closure in other ways:

the rain, thinking I've gone, crackles the air
and calls by name the leaves that aren't yet there

Without the finality of punctuation, without the conventional closure of a full stop, the line is left open, and we are left listening. How does the absence of a full stop sound at the end of Oswald's poem? The absence of a full stop plays with our expectations of how the end of the poem should look: since punctuation marks are used earlier and throughout the poem, we expect a full stop; its absence at the poem's end is marked. And the conclusion resists closure in other ways: the rhyme words air and there open up space — pointing to the capaciousness of air, pointing out there — just as the couplet clinches in the sound of the rhyme. There and air invite us to listen out — to the sound of the rain crackling the air, to the air at the end of the line — on the page it is figured as white space, read out loud it is held in breath. That last word there is distal and deictic, pointing to a position that is not here but further away, and it can also suggest another sense, to exist, or 'to be present' (OED, IV.12.a) — the leaves that are not yet there do not yet exist. The word there points to a space — grammatically and also spatially, on the page — as the line and the poem ends without punctuation, in white, in air. There is a subtle process of evaporation at work through the sonnet, from its very first word closed, the poem opens out — into gaps in trees, through the crackle of rain, into air, out into the future, to the leaves that aren't yet there. The space at the end of a line can be a moment of release, of exhalation, but it can also invite a taking in of breath. Rita Dove describes the reader's physical experience of the line as a moment of breathing in, an experience which can test the reader's own physical limits: every time you hit that white space ... you know you're going to go back, and you take a little breath, or you try to catch one, because you don't know what's coming. Every time you go back, it's with a sense of relief, snapping back, but knowing that you're going to out there into the abyss. So there's that oral sense, but there's also: How long can you hold your breath? How long can you breathe?⁴

Writing 200 years earlier, William Wordsworth explored the somatic power of the line's end in 'The Boy of Winander'.⁵ In these lines, first drafted in 1798, in Ratzeburg, Germany, the line end is a moment of breath held, of suspension. Here, a boy (Wordsworth himself, in this early version) stands at the edge of Lake Windemere (Winander) blowing out mimic hootings to 'the silent owls' through cupped hands, waiting for an answer:

... And when it chanced
That pauses of deep silence mockd my skill
Then, often, in that silence while I hung
Listening a sudden shock of mild surprize
Would carry far into my heart the voice
Of mountain torrents: or the visible scene
Would enter unawares into my mind
With all its solemn imagery its rocks,
Its woods & that uncertain heaven rece[i]ved
Into the bosom of the steady lake

That word chanced, poised at the brink of the line, makes the most of the spatial and syntactic opportunity that the line-end affords for uncertainty, a hesitation into the unknown. The use of the verb chanced in its intransitive form makes the event itself the subject, an event we are left anticipating, listening out for, at the end of the line, when what chanced? The line end leaves us anticipating, listening for the that that follows. But Wordsworth went on to alter the dynamics of this moment when he revised these lines, changing chanced to pause in the version that appeared in *The Prelude* (1850):

and, when a lengthened pause
Of silence came and baffled his best skill,
Then sometimes, in that silence while he hung
Listening, a gentle shock of mild surprise
Has carried far into his heart the voice
Of mountain torrents; or the visible scene
Would enter unawares into his mind,
With all its solemn imagery, its rocks,
Its woods, and that uncertain heaven, received
Into the bosom of the steady lake.⁷

Comparing versions of a poem is a great way to focus thinking and generate discussion. When ‘The Boy of Winander’ was revised and incorporated into the *Prelude* (1850), chanced had been changed to a lengthened pause, so that we have a noun phrase instead of a verb. What is the difference between the experience and the sense of reading chanced and a lengthened pause at the end of the line? What kind of suspense do we feel, how do we breathe, when we read chanced at the line’s end? How does this compare with the way a lengthened pause invites us to breathe? A sense of suspense is even more pronounced a couple of lines later, when we reach the word hung, used here, we discover, as we read over to the next line, in a figurative sense, meaning to wait in suspense (rather than the physical sense of hanging from a cliff, say). Once again, the reader is suspended, both grammatically and syntactically, at the edge of the line, a version of that suspense which Wordsworth describes experiencing, as he waited, poised, for a sound — the hooting of an owl. And yet the sound he actually hears through the silence comes as a surprise. Wordsworth thinks carefully about the position of words in the line: surprise, which appears a few lines later, at the line’s end, offers the reader an experience, in syntax and in space, of the surprise it describes, so that we are left waiting to know what the surprise did, what it was, left waiting for the main verb clause. Thinking about Wordsworth’s lines, Christopher Ricks’ essay ‘A Pure Organic Pleasure from the Lines’, first published many years ago, in *Essays in Criticism*, is illuminating.⁸ Ricks celebrates the playful possibilities of sense and of experience waiting at the end of the line. Sometimes we read the essay before class, sometimes after we’ve looked at the poem together, to extend and consolidate what we’ve discovered. It’s an essay about the importance of line endings, about the power of line endings. I explain that many years ago, this essay transformed the way I read poetry, drawing attention to the white space at the line end as a form of punctuation and as a form of drama. How does a poem’s form affect the way we read a line of verse? In Wordsworth’s blank verse lines, instead of rhyme, we have another kind of equivalence, that of experience between subject and reader — so that the reader and the speaking subject both experience, in different ways, chance, suspense, surprise, dramatizing both in sense and in syntax the experience that is always available at the end of the line, as we listen out into silence, as the boy, as Wordsworth, listens into silence. This silence is figured not as an absence of sound, but as a strange, unsettled, and unsettling presence. In these lines, silence is made strange by the prepositional phrase in that which precedes the word silence - in that silence while I hung/ Listening. The deictic that points to a particular silence — and there has, in the poem, already been a silence — a silence which mocked my skill. Is this second silence, that silence? But how can that animated, personified silence that mocked now be inhabited, like a space, so that the poet can be mocked by an object of the silence’s action, inside, hanging in, at once? Wordsworth is not listening to silence, or into the silence, or even through the silence, but listening in that silence, so that the silence becomes a space, medium in which he is suspended, waiting. But are the silences the same? Is that silence the same silence that mocked? This ambiguity is not quite resolved — instead, the reader is suspended between two ways of understanding silence, two possibilities, poised in a moment of not quite knowing. And at the end

of the line, the word hung leaves us in a different kind of suspense, not quite knowing: the word while prompts us to look for a main clause — while what? What happened in that silence while I hung? But when we reach the next line, we are surprised by the word listening — having been listening over the line for the main verb, we are met with another listening, before we discover what happens while he hung, that is to say, before we reach a gentle shock of mild surprise. The silence Wordsworth hears is not what he has been listening for — the sound of the owls. Listening into that silence for a sound, he is surprised by a voice, by the voice of mountain waters. And he hears it not in his ears, but in his heart. Not in his heart, but far into his heart. Those short words far and into open up great distances: a voice travelling over the hills, across the valleys. Then the surprise intimacy of heart. At once far off and near. The listening heart. The heart transformed, expanded, opened up by listening.

If Wordsworth presents listening to the natural world as a powerful and unsettling experience, the contemporary poet Jen Hadfield unsettles us in a different way. Her poem ‘Lichen’ (2014) invites us to imagine lichen listening. It opens with a question:

Who listens
like lichen listens
assiduous millions of black
and golden ears?
You hear
and remember
but I’m speaking
to the lichen.
The little ears prunk,
scorch and blacken.
The little golden
mouths gape. 9

The poem’s opening question, Who listens, shapes our listening rhetorically, but also tonally, and in the cadence of a question, spread over several lines — a question which opens up a pause, a space of anticipation into which we listen. A few lines later, the reader (the listener) is told that the lyric voice is addressing the lichen, you hear, but I’m speaking to the lichen, so that we are reminded that we are not being addressed in the rest of the poem, not hearing but overhearing. Our hearing is contrasted to the listening of the lichen, set up as a different kind of aural experience. The physicality of the lichen’s listening is emphasized, its little ears prunk, scorch and blacken, suggesting its sensitivity to sounds, like ears being burned — and the little mouths gape in surprise. Prunk is a word which stands out in register as the past tense of a colloquial term, prink, (OED 2a transitive): ‘To make tidy, spruce, or smart; to dress up, deck out, adorn’. It’s a surprise to find lichen prinking, to think of lichen adorning itself. Hadfield offers a moment of process, of listening as process: the lichen’s listening ears prunking before scorching and blackening. The word scorch collocates both with the idea of burning but also with a figurative sense of ears burning when someone is speaking about you, a sense of embarrassment. Listening to these very short lines, the ear can’t quite settle on a rhythm or a pattern of sounds, but there are sounds that carry across the lines creating clusters of emphasis. The word listens is repeated at the end of lines 1 and 2: as these are very short lines, the repetition is especially marked, emphasizing this key word of the poem. If we listen in, we can hear the sound of the listening as it spreads in the s sounds from listens into the word assiduous, which stands out in the poem with its polysyllables and Latinate register; assiduous describes the kind of listening taking place. Listening to a poem involves paying attention to these patterns of sound, to assonance and alliteration. The k sounds at line’s end: prunk, blacken, speaking, lichen. Or the l from lichen and listens sounds again in millions and black and golden. The end of a short line has a different weight and emphasis to the end of a long line. Here, in Hadfield’s poem, that word ears ends the clause, but the receptivity it suggests, its openness to listening is emphasized as it is drawn into a rhyme with hear across the wider white space between stanzas and into the next stanza, opening up a more prolonged listening across space. The poem ends on the word gape, which suggests an open mouth, an expression of surprise, and leaves the poem open in its very moment of closure.

For Kathleen Jamie, the line end is the defining feature of poetry: When I’m asked what is the difference between poetry and prose, I reply the status of the line. Lines that were both controlled and

breathed, that listened to language, that revealed and slowed ... or raced and paced – these were hard to find.¹⁰ Her poem ‘Fianuis’ (2015), Kathleen Jamie offers a soundscape at the land’s edge and invites our listening:

Well, friend, we’re here again —
sauntering the last half-mile to the land’s frayed end
to find what’s laid on for us, strewn across the turf —
gull feathers, bleached shells,
a whole bull seal, bone-dry,
knackered from the rut
(we knock on his leathern head, but no one’s home).
Change, change — that’s what the terns scream
down at their seaward rocks;
fleet clouds and salt kiss —
everything else is provisional,
us and all our works.
I guess that’s why we like it here:
listen — a brief lull,
a rock pipit’s seed-small notes.¹¹

Jamie is writing for the eye as well the ear: the poem’s shape corresponds with the land’s frayed ends it describes. The lines spread out jagged and uneven, opened out across the page, opening up a different, more exploratory kind of listening than if they were stacked up neatly. The stepped lines measure out different lengths of silence. Words at the ends of Jamie’s lines seem aware of their own liminality: end, provisional, even kiss, which anticipates eye and ear connecting with the start of the next line. The deictic word here encourages us to think about the place described, the cliff/shore, but also the landscape of the poem — its edges — bringing together the poet and the reader’s listening as it brings together the space of the page with space of the shore. The word scream resounds in the s and c sounds in seaward rocks and then again in fleet clouds and salt kiss, suggesting a fading echoic acoustic of sounds across the edge of land and into sea. The poem ends with the sound of birds; very specifically, a rock pipit’s seed-small notes, which have an onomatopoeic quality with their cadence and rhythm, opening out from the short sounds of rock pipit to the more prolonged and insistent clustering of stresses in seed small notes. And that last word notes sounds an echo of words from the start of the poem, bone, home, inviting us to listen back, listen again. The poem’s invitation to listen comes at the start of the penultimate line and is an imperative — listen — before a pause, a brief lull. For Jamie the lull is a listening space. In the poem, and in her own experience. She describes how she listens in the lull, into the lull, in her autobiographical writings: Between the laundry and fetching kids from school, that’s how birds enter my life. I listen. During a lull in the traffic: oyster catchers; in the school playground, sparrows –¹² In her poem ‘Fianuis’, the phrase brief lull suggests a particular duration and kind of silence; lull is a more familiar term than silence, since it carries a ghost of its secondary meaning, to sooth, so that the silence Jamie describes is soothing, rather than menacing and unsettling, like the silence in Wordsworth’s ‘There was a Boy’. The position of lull at the end of the line opens the silence out into white space, so that eye and ear are, once again, in accord.

Listening to a poem means being attentive to cadence, tone, rhythms, and sound patterns, but also to the secondary senses of words, and to that ‘indissoluble’ combination of patterns, the ‘musical pattern of sound and the musical pattern of the secondary meanings of the words which compose it’, as Eliot described it in his essay *The Music of Poetry*.¹³ But to this we also need to add — to listen out for — to pay heed — not only to the senses and histories of words, but also to the tones and shapes and meanings of the spaces, pauses and silences of a poem, in a poem and at its edges. Listening to the end of the line, listening at the end of the line, listening out at the end of the line, we can sometimes hear a rhyme, or anticipate one coming, we can also listen out for a verb or a clause to complete the sense left suspended in the line, we can, as Denise Levertov has pointed out in her essay ‘On the Function of the Line’ (1979), hear the melos of a phrase, its pitch patterns and intonation, its musical structure, but also something else — the shape of the silence — the air — the feeling of momentary suspension, its weight, its texture, thickness, its duration.¹⁴