

# The Line

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“It is as if we were back at the *Théâtre des Funambules*, during the era of *Les Enfants du Paradis*, when pale-faced Pierrots walked a rope before stepping onto the stage. It was actually a tightrope set across the proscenium, in front of Harlequin’s coat (the stage curtain). Actors who were not acrobats or mimes fell off the rope and were sent to perform far up backstage. So the word ‘rope’ was banned from the theatre and its use subject to a fine. One had to say ‘line’.”

-- Marcel Marceau, Foreword to *On the High Wire* by Philippe Petit

A book fell into my hands on Christmas Eve: a loan, a great Christmas present, from a friend who used to be a circus performer. Long out of print, it’s almost as hard to obtain as the condition it describes: *On the High Wire*, by Philippe Petit, translated by Paul Auster, with a foreword by Marcel Marceau. The book doesn’t mention Petit’s famous walk between the towers of the World Trade Center, but focuses on the mysteries of the high wire itself: technique, great walkers who have mastered it, and the spiritual impulse and discipline of the walk.

As I read, I began to see – ahem – parallels. A writer, an acrobat of the page, can only aspire to the condition of the wire walker. But from a lifetime of reading poetry we know that its effect, the thing that touches the spectator, is the same: the poet is in his way a magician, a mime, a trapeze artist, and he must proceed just as carefully as these if his poems are to be successful. So it is pleasing to learn about how to approach the writing of poetry from these great silent masters.

Of course, if his line is slack or unsupported, or if he puts too much ego-awareness into his backward turns, a poet is not going to die. But his meaning will – and, for the duration of the poem, his meaning is his existence. The line has to be taut, and strong enough to hold, and the grease left over from production cannot be oozing out of its “soul.” (The wire walkers have an entire lore just about the construction of the rope: its materials, width, methods. The central core, often of a different substance from the rest, is called its “soul.” Petit buys huge lengths of cable and leaves them out in the garden “for several years” to become completely dry and weathered, then cleans them with gasoline. Elizabeth Bishop famously did this with her poems.)

“Whoever intends to master the art of walking on them,” writes Petit, “must take on the task of seeking them out. Of comparing them. Of keeping those whose properties correspond to his aspirations. Of learning how to knot them. Of knowing how to tighten them.

It is the work of a lifetime.”

Later in the book he writes, “If you want the High Wire to transform you into a high-wire walker you must discover the classic purity of this game. But first you must master its technique. Too bad for the one who turns it into a chore.”

In other words, the dedication is the thing seeping out of *your* soul. So what is the *lore* of a line of poetry? What is it?

A line of poetry is made – crudely – of two things, words and line endings. They are made to length, knotted together, constructed and tethered, tightened and tested, and need to be able to carry the poet’s intentions.

Of these, words are made of meaning and sound.

Meaning is made of dictionary definitions, association, history, etymology, word play, and even – to some extent – sound. The meaning in poetry flies higher than the meaning in prose: two sentences with identical “meanings” can mean vastly different things according to the choice of words and sounds, the provenance of the words, the consonants. Think about these soft sounds: ‘I will arise and go now, and go to Innisfree’. Aside from the formal, almost archaic ‘arise’, and the repetition of the phrase ‘and go now’, let’s imagine what would differently be conveyed if we said, ‘I’ll get up and depart, and depart to Nantucket’.

Sound is made of waves, which produce both noise and a physical effect on the body. These waves make patterns: softness, hardness, openness and closedness, assonance and alliteration, rhyme, dissonance, rhythm. Rhythm is a patterning of relatively regular emphasis, of speed, pauses – which poets call caesurae – and of the length of the line itself. The “standard” line of English poetry, the iambic pentameter, is said to be the length of a breath.

We measure the most regular rhythms with a tool called metre. Metre is measured in feet of neatly-laid-out syllables, or by the number of syllables that are emphasised (“stressed”) in a line. Some irregularity is permissible in metre, but if it gets too irregular it becomes free verse, which may have a defined, if loose, rhythm of its own.

Line endings are, of course, the most problematical part of a line, because they define its shape, tension, and relation to adjoining lines. Many poetry tutors don’t like to discuss them at all; it’s almost as bad as crying “Rope!” in the *Théâtre des Funambules*.

The end stop, the enjambment, the if, and or but, the clever trick. Michael Donaghy compared rhyme to tightrope walking, or stiltwalking, and I’d add line breaks in general to that comparison. According to Donaghy, if you use rhyme it’s like walking into the room on stilts or a rope, saying, look what I can do! If the rhymes are too obvious, if they fail, you fall on your face and they laugh instead of admiring your skill. I’d say if you use line endings clumsily you run the same risk. In the world of the high wire they call these the anchor points, and they utilise the most careful skill in deciding where they are to be placed.

Ending on a preposition or particle is, to my mind, an almost surefire way of falling down. Like the one-word line or the one-line stanza, it creates a particular nervy effect. It is difficult to do this really convincingly; it operates as part of a system whereby the line is weighted at its first word – so the dying fall of the ending is a ruse, the reader trips up slightly, and the first word of the next line picks it up and tautens the whole thing again, consistently along the whole line. In fact, the particle or preposition is the very thing that puts the weight on the start of the next line – so you'd better be sure it can bear it. If not, your reader will never regain footing.

The line that ends misleadingly halfway through a phrase, which completely changes in meaning once the reader reaches the second half, is another. There is a significant tension between the ending of one line and the start of the next, and this tension can be pleurably heightened by adding to the previously deduced meaning suddenly. If the second half of the phrase alters, rather than adds to, the meaning of the first half, it breaks the link between the two lines.

I recently heard someone say they judged if the lines in a poem were working by how they looked on the page. If the poem “looks okay”, whatever that means, then the lines are working. This statement – and I honestly can't remember who made it – goes against the entire principle of what you're up there trying to accomplish. Sure, a poem should look okay on the page, but this will change – yes it will – even according to the proportions of the typeface used, the kerning and general page layout. It is more true to say that if a poem works, is held together by its own internal tension in a state of delicate yet tensile balance, it will tend to work on the page. The elements of this tension are listed above. Sound is absolutely critical and informs everything.

“Sound” means *listening* to your words as they really are, not according to syllable counts and not shutting your ear because you think the “meaning” is fine. Of course it is always a good idea to say your poem out loud, but you should really have been listening to the words in your mind's ear as they occurred. Rejecting or choosing them in the twinkle of a soundwave. It means understanding the values of different sounds, If you really hear the sounds your words make, the feel of them in the mouth. If you have tuned your words as delicately as a violinist tunes his strings – another kind of “tight rope” – you will not end one metrical line with a crammed-in extra syllable, only to begin the next one with another. You won't write free verse poems with inadvertent lines of perfect metre – say, rollicking dactylic tetrameter in a lean, hard poem about your dad's death. And you'll never stand in a venue reading out your own words with the stresses where they shouldn't fall. “Now IS the WINter OF our DISconTENT!” you will not say.

And yet at almost any reading you go to, you hear poets reading their own work like this.

But it's not just poetry, although poets seem to have a sad tendency to think poetry stands apart from everything else. The novelist James M Cain reports an anecdote about the making of the film *Double Indemnity*, when the director, Billy Wilder, complained that the screenwriter – Raymond Chandler – was throwing away Cain's original “nice, terse dialogue.” Cain told the *Paris Review* that Wilder “got some student actors from the Paramount school, coached them up, to let Chandler hear what

it would be like if he would only put what was in the book in his screenplay. To his astonishment it sounded like holy hell..." It was "written to the eye."

Harry Secombe had an anecdote about being in a "straight" radio play early in his career, before the pure comedy of the Goons. But comedy creeps in, and actors have lines too – and 'rope' to hang themselves. A young, inexperienced actor was cast by mistake, instead of a well-known performer with the same name. Attempting to read the line, "I'm going now, so help me on with my coat," the poor fellow declaimed: "I'm going now, so help me – on with my coat!" The producers realised their mistake: as in *les Funambules*, he had fallen off the line. He was not seen again. It became a family catchphrase.

In other words, "looking okay" is a *result, not a condition*, of success.

A whole chapter of Petit's book lists many exercises the high-wire walker will learn. The tricks the wire-walker can do on the wire. These include walking backward, doing comedy routines, wearing disguises and imitating characters or animals; incorporating other people or animals into the act; "tricks with a Chinese umbrella or an Indian fan," dancing, jumping, taking tea, and lying down. 'Resting' is a most painful exercise and requires the walker to move through a whole internal landscape of pain and fear, before he reaches the point of stillness lying on the line.

Once he is an accomplished high-wire walker, the walker keeps his low wire for practicing these exercises and inventing new ones, making them perfect, discarding the ones that don't work for him. You must drop an exercise from your act if it is distracting you in practice sessions. Once on the wire you need to feel comfortable and able to give yourself to the moment. "Silent and alone, he brings to the high cable everything he has learned down below. He discards the movements space will not support and gathers up the others into a group that he will polish, refine, lighten, and bring closer to himself."

The list of tricks, or exercises, a poet can perform on his or her line is also nearly endless; some of them are even the same as above. They need to be learnt and practiced too. "Limits, traps, impossibilities are nothing to me," writes Philippe Petit. "Every day I go out to look for them. I believe the whip is necessary only when it is held by the student, not the teacher." He describes doing his practising in blizzards, in rain, on wobbly lines, in mismatched shoes, in wooden shoes, with people shaking the installation ropes, drunk, even naked. "You must struggle against the elements to learn that staying on a wire is nothing," he writes. "Limits exist only in the souls of those who do not dream."

Or write poetry, dear reader. Like Philippe Petit, we give a 12-minute performance even though our heads are stuffed full of the knowledge of centuries. So let's go and practice our exercises and techniques, and strive to create the illusion based on reality, precision, breath, fluid movement, and the utter stillness of balance on the line.