

Robert Hass:
Poetry Craft Lecture
Sewanee Conference 2010

(excerpts transcribed from youtube video)

A single line is a naked thing. For that reason it is both light and heavy. Only a line like a sparrow's breast; it only weighs about as much as a teabag. But it is complete which gives it a certain kind of weight. It's the basic unit of all lyric forms.

2 of them make a couplet, or in the work songs of the bantu people something that they call a combination.

3 of them make a blues lyric or a stanza of Dantes terza rima.

4 a hymna stanza or a ballad stanza or a chinese quatrain.

5 in the Japanese make a tanka, and so on.

If we can get 1 and get 2 we can get most of the rest. Important information for poets. It is much easier Robert Lowell said to write a good poem than to write a good line. I think there is no craft at all in writing a good line. God does that or something like that.

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If a line makes a completed sense it's heir and hostage to the structure of English grammar in which something happens to something: noun, verb, object.

“worms will try your long preserved virginity”

Or has the quality of something:

“the art of losing isn't hard to master”

“all things that love the sun are out of doors”

Even in contemporary experimental non representational poetry:

“inca this egyptian knock it over night”
has a ghost of syntax clinging about it.

The hidden paradigm of the single line its completed
of course is the sentence,
without which can be no enjambment, and the sentence
imitates insight
which is to say it imitates individuation, the becoming
of the thought that separates us from others and gives
us a self.

I think that's an important notion for thinking about
what the basic unit is in a poem and...I'm trying to
think about what would be useful to the playwrights
and the storytellers here. The particular formal arc of
the story, or play, or a narrative is a sentence, that is
to say that the beginning the middle and the end of a
narrative mimic the noun verb and the object. That is
as Beth said the beginning is desire, the middle is

action, and the end is consequence. So when you come out of a play or a movie or you finish being told a story you've been given a sentence and you walk out individuated in some way by that experience.

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The interesting thing about the work of art as a sentence is that its an action and that it ends or has an ending - maybe more an ending than anything in life does.

Life is a process. We are verbs not nouns. We're verbs until we die, then we become nouns maybe...the sentence gives us noun-like...

The idea roughly is I think that in the individual sentence and the individual line and the individual work of art a tension between action and stillness that is the source of endless paradox, because we feel paradoxically the play between being and becoming within ourselves at all times. And so while we're

playing with recurrence and rhythm how much we want reassurance in the sound of a poem or in the structure of the painting or in the order of a story and how much we want something chaotic...That are just as much a play of form as drumming is.

Greek mathematicians did not think that one was a number because the concept one did not involve number. To them two is the first number. And the hybrid marriage of one, which was not a number and two which was, begot three the second number; and from one, two, and three, all other numbers proceeded. So that all odd numbers had something in them that was not number.

This is why Plato said the leap from one to two, in human beings, actually he had Socrates say it, was the leap to rationality. Which is probably why Leonard Bernstein said that two is the rhythm of the body and

three is the rhythm of the mind.

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But it does make sense to me to think of three as the mixed generative form. The one that generates more things, the play of odd against even. And that the ground beats of being is 2 and the spinning of becoming is in the 3s.

Here are some memorable one sentence lines. [All from the 16th and 17th centuries.]

“I sought my death and found it in my tomb.”

“Sweet thames run softly till I end my song.”

“Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?”

“Those were pearls that were his eyes”

“Gut eats all day and leches through the night.”

“For God's sake hold your tongue and let me love.”

“I am a little world made cunningly.”

“Is all good structure in a winding stair?”

...

[According to Ginsberg and perhaps Robert Hass:]
The lines of the great blues songs were in fact the
American haiku.

“I walked here from East St. Louis and I aint got one
thin dime.”

“I hate to see that evening sun go down.”

“Sometimes I feel like a motherless child.”

“No hiding place down here.”

“Swing low sweet chariot.”

“Blackbird sitting on the tree of life.”

“Good morning blues, blues how do you do?”

“If you don't like ocean don't fish my sea.”

“Ain't no use to wandering, neither to strutting
around.”

“Just make me a pallet on the floor.”

“Blood red river and a rocking chair.”

Which spills over into the popular lyric which took off

from it.

“The mississippi delta is shining like a national guitar.”

“I wish I had a river I could skate away.”

“Lay across my big brass bed.”

This is such a rich and generous lecture by Robert Hass. I just want to add a few thoughts.

...Hass speaks of the arc of a sentence or narrative defining the subject/noun in such a way as to provide individuation.

1) We are thereby given a model of individuation as readers. Effective writing will have more impact on the reader, but our contradiction and self-determination of the work is ultimately what gives the reader

individuation through the process. Thus we are co-transformers with the writer. The writer can be an amazing guide, or can dupe us.

2) The definition that takes place in the “consequence” stage of the narrative, (when the noun verbs the Object), is revealed at the end of the linear process, for instance in a play. The latter part shapes our impression of the beginning. It is not a one way process. Also though we are becoming, and shaped by time, we have a significant inborn nature that determines the whole sentence. If the line comes like lightning, so does the whole poem. The poem flows out of the premises and nature of the first line and the first fact. Poems and people are synergistic and are formed by eternity.

3) The noun becomes known through the play of form in the progress of the whole “sentence” or piece. Our nouns are set because our nouns are known, and only known nouns can be taken as nouns. There is a limit

to how far we can celebrate or mourn a noun under Heaven. That is, even a great person, can only be mourned with all our verbal power, but then it ceases. Even our mourning itself will soon seek for enlarged grief, or release, through the insertion of sentences, and reference to greater fact.

4) In my faith as a Christian I honor Jesus' death on the Cross as the mystical revelation of the bridge to paradise, the public access to the Divine, and reliable entry to reconciliation with God. This is an endless grief, if He did not dry our tears. This is also the endless grief of those who neglect Him if He does not save the ones who reject Him. By His life, we have the true completion of sentences and works. Many of these sentences are the Gospel, and they are the eternal thoughts of God. Jesus is the perfect man. Jesus is also the salvation of man in all his complications. Just in these two things are factors essential to our completed thought as human beings.

Through the belief in truths like these we see, and can be light in our eternal completion. Otherwise our completion is marked by negation. This nature of the Christian Word, that eternity is our completion through the Cross, brings much more sense to Robert Hass' terrific explanation of the sentence in time.