Poetic inversion

Poetic inversion, or changing the usual word order of speech, is often linked to the need to maintain a rhythm or to find a rhyme. We noticed Pope’s poetic inversion in An Essay on Criticism and saw how the rhyme was intimately linked to the rhythm of the verse. The song ‘Dancing in the Street’, first recorded by Martha and the Vandellas in the 1960s, does violence to word order in the interests of rhyme – ‘There’ll be dancing in the street/ A chance new folk to meet’ – but, because the words are sung to a driving rhythm, we are unlikely to notice how awkward they are. There’s a convention that we recognize, however unconsciously, that prevents us from mentally re-writing the line as ‘a chance to meet new people’. (‘People’ rather than ‘folk’ would be more usual usage for me, but, as with the Pope example, this would mean that the rhythm too would be lost.)

Poems that don’t rhyme

Are poems that don’t rhyme prose? Not necessarily. Virginia Woolf (1882–1941), a novelist rather than a poet, and T.S. Eliot (1888–1965), known particularly for his poetry, both wrote descriptive pieces best described as ‘prose poems’. These look like short prose passages since there is no attention to line lengths or layout on the page, as there was, for example, in ‘Mariana’. When you study Shakespeare you will come across blank verse. ‘Blank’ here means ‘not rhyming’, but the term ‘blank verse’ is used specifically to describe verse in unrhyming iambic pentameters.

Although iambic pentameters resemble our normal speech patterns, in ordinary life we speak in prose. You’ll notice if you look through Shakespeare’s plays that blank verse is reserved for kings, nobles, heroes and heroines. They may also speak in prose, as lesser characters do, but commoners don’t ever have speeches in blank verse. Shakespeare – and other playwrights like him – used the form to indicate status. It is important to recognize this convention, which would have been understood by his contemporaries – writers, readers, and audiences alike. So choosing to write a poem in blank verse is an important decision: it will elevate the subject. One such example is Milton’s epic Paradise Lost (1667), a long poem in twelve Books describing Creation, Adam and Eve’s temptation, disobedience and expulsion from Paradise. It sets out to justify the ways of God to man, so blank verse is entirely appropriate. This great epic was in Wordsworth’s mind when he chose the same form for his autobiographical poem, The Prelude. Compare the following lines from Book XIII of The Prelude, where Wordsworth is walking up Mount Snowdon, with the extract from ‘The Idiot Boy’, one of his Lyrical Ballads.

What effects are achieved by the different forms?

The Prelude (1799–1806), Book XIII, ll.29–44

With forehead bent
Earthward, as if in opposition set
Against an enemy, I panted up
With eager pace, and no less eager thoughts.
Thus might we wear perhaps an hour away,
Ascending at loose distance each from each,
And I, as chanced, the foremost of the Band,
When at my feet the ground appear’d to brighten,
And with a step or two seem’d brighter still,
Nor had I time to ask the cause of this,
For instantly a Light upon the turf
Fell like a flash: I look’d about, and lo!
The Moon stood naked in the Heavens, at height
Immense above my head, and on the shore
I found myself of a huge sea of mist,
Which meek and silent, rested at my feet: …

(OWENS and JOHNSON, 1998, pp.169–7)
‘The Idiot Boy’ (1798)

‘Tis eight o’clock, – a clear March night,
The moon is up, – the sky is blue,
The owlet, in the moonlight air, –
Shouts from nobody knows where;
He lengthens out his lonely shout,
Halloo! halloo! A long halloo!

– Why bustle thus about your door?
What means this bustle, Betty Foy?
Why are you in this mighty fret?
And why on horseback have you set
Him whom you love, your idiot boy?

(Hutchinson, rev. edn 1969, p.100)

Both poems use iambic metre – an unstressed followed by a stressed syllable. The extract from The Prelude uses iambic pentameters, five metrical feet in each line, whereas ‘The Idiot Boy’ (like the ballad, ‘Love From the North’) is in tetrameters, only four, establishing a more sing-song rhythm. Other stylistic techniques contribute to the difference in tone too: the language of The Prelude is formal (Wordsworth’s ‘Ascending’ rather than ‘going up’), whereas ‘The Idiot Boy’ uses deliberately homely diction, and rhyme. Three simple rhyme words ring out throughout the 92 stanzas of the latter: ‘Foy’, ‘boy’ and ‘joy’ stand at the heart of the poem, expressing the mother’s pride in her son.

The moon features in each extract. In The Prelude, as Wordsworth climbs, the ground lightens, as it does in The Old Testament before a prophet appears. Far from being a meaningless syllable to fill the rhythm of a line, ‘lo!’ heightens the religious parallel, recalling the biblical ‘Lo, I bring you tidings of great joy’: this episode from The Prelude describes a moment of spiritual illumination. Wordsworth’s intentions in these two poems were quite different, and the techniques reflect that.

Other poems that don’t use rhyme are discussed below (‘Wherever I Hang’, p.17; ‘Mona Lisa’, p.19; ‘Poem’, p.23). Notice that they use a variety of rhythms, and because of that none can be described as blank verse.

Voice

Is the speaker in a poem one and the same as the writer? Stop and consider this for a few moments. Can you think of any poems you have read where a writer has created a character, or persona, whose voice we hear when we read?

Wordsworth’s The Prelude was written as an autobiographical poem, but there are many instances where it is obvious that poet and persona are different. Charlotte Mew’s poem, ‘The Farmer’s Bride’ (1916) begins like this:

Three summers since I chose a maid,
Too young maybe – but more’s to do
At harvest-time than bide and woo.

When we was wed she turned afraid
Of love and me and all things human;

(Warner, 1981, pp.1–2)

Mew invents a male character here, and clearly separates herself as a writer from the voice in her poem. Some of the most well-known created characters – or personae – in poetry are Browning’s dramatic monologues. Consider these opening lines. Who do you think is speaking?