Poems written in the first person are just as likely to be fiction as poems written in the third person. It is important never to assume that the ‘I’ of any poem is the direct voice of the poet.

Line lengths and line endings

Read the following prose extract taken from Walter Pater’s discussion of the Mona Lisa, written in 1893:

She is older than the rocks among which she sits; like the vampire, she has been dead many times, and learned the secrets of the grave; and has been a diver in deep seas, and keeps their fallen day about her; and trafficked for strange webs with Eastern merchants: and, as Leda, was the mother of Helen of Troy, and, as Saint Anne, the mother of Mary; and all this has been to her but as the sound of lyres and flutes, and lives only in the delicacy with which it has moulded the changing lineaments, and tinged the eyelids and the hands.

When W.B. Yeats was asked to edit The Oxford Book of Modern Verse 1892–1935 (1936), he chose to begin with this passage from Pater, but he set it out quite differently on the page. Before you read his version, write out the extract as a poem yourself. The exercise is designed to make you think about line lengths, where to start a new line and where to end it when there is no rhyme to give you a clue. There is no regular rhythm either, though I’m sure you will discover rhythms in the words, as well as repeated patterns. How can you best bring out these poetic features?

Of course, there is no right answer to this exercise, but you should compare your version to Yeats’s, printed below, to see if you made similar decisions.

She is older than the rocks among which she sits;
Like the Vampire,
She has been dead many times,
And learned the secrets of the grave;
And has been a diver in deep seas,
And keeps their fallen day about her;
And trafficked for strange webs with Eastern merchants;
And, as Leda,
Was the mother of Helen of Troy,
And, as St Anne,
Was the mother of Mary;
And all this has been to her but as the sound of lyres and flutes,
And lives
Only in the delicacy
With which it has moulded the changing lineaments,
And tinged the eyelids and the hands.

I wonder whether you used upper case letters for the first word of each line, as Yeats did? You may have changed the punctuation, or perhaps have left it out altogether. Like Yeats, you may have used ‘And’ at the beginnings of lines to draw attention to the repetitions: nine of the lines begin in this way, emphasizing the way the clauses pile up, defining and redefining the mysterious Mona Lisa. Two lines begin with ‘She’: while there was no choice about the first, beginning the third in the same way focuses attention on her right at the start of the poem. Yeats has used Pater’s punctuation to guide his line endings in all but two places: lines 13 and 14 run on – a stylistic device known as **enjambment.** The effect is an interesting interaction between eyes and ears. While we may be tempted to read on without pausing to find the sense, the line endings and white space of the page impose pauses on our reading, less than the commas and semi-colons that mark off the other lines, but significant nevertheless.

Yeats’s arrangement of the words makes the structure and movement of Pater’s long sentence clearer than it appears when written as prose. The poem begins with age – she is