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READING LINES LINEAR HOW TO MEAN

[2011 in Emily Rosko & Anton Vander Zee, eds., *A Broken Thing: Poets on the Line*]

Reading struggles to make meaning, meaning anew & embodied, or to make matter 'matter.' But, ideally: without letting too much 'in the way of' presuppositions getting in the way of a reading experience & judgment, without their being kept too much 'in line.'ⁱ

1. First: the line can be an obstacle, a straightening barrier to experience's full efflorescence. *Lines linear outline*, a faux transparency of truth in packaging: *clear boundaries' effect*, its damper on our freedom of apprehension (prior to judgment), so we *notice the package from its perimeter*, or mistake the insides for the lining, as lines propose or valorize a *consistency*, an *evenness*, those *seemingly internal contours which end up packaging the insides so that they can react or point or be subordinated, as a homogenized unit, to what's outside*. A vertical axis (of reference: either representational or personally expressive) pulls our attention outward, but all the more easily (& seemingly without the violence of any command) if the internal packaging does its conservative work. The lining as containment, as a framing — an innocent jumble of material gets framed for crimes it hasn't yet committed, or expressions & references it's not even invested in. Magnetic pull of a limiting, pre-set (& seemingly non-public, privatizable) outside which forces or reduces our reading experience — helped along by the lining (& its supplement) of the insides. *Lines as signatures of meaning by inscription* — as if we're being asked to immobilize ourselves as we 'second the motion' or, more likely, second a lack of motion; to become the hapless con who dutifully countersigns the author's signatures or the referential set-up's indexing, to end up reinforcing the coercive verticality of the text. We get inscribed. We get positioned, carefully, right above the line (as if we are in danger of falling off, going

'wayward' — instead of being 'wards' of 'the way') — '*relationships by force*,' by indexical overpowering, with circumstances turning us into clues (or clue hunters) before we even get a chance to act for ourselves. Before the fact, but prepped for apprehension, as if *after the fact*, marking off an internal hierarchy of value identified with parts or tags, disciplining the already constituted body. Plus — doing this 'ahead of time': if not disenfranchising our potential readings, then at least gridding or anticipating or preempting them, not doing justice to time [& its stand-ins, matter & materiality], but 'just in time.' *Too late*. Don't these function as colonizings? — operated by leash of closures of (prior or predictable) time or of outward (— someone else's, but not a collective public) space. Also: as if the two are mutually allegorizing. Readers [judges] set up (or locked in, locked up) to be in circumstances 'behind the time' &/or in 'outer space.' *How far inside are we?* However far it is, it feels as if it's enforced, that we're usually getting 'delivered.' And marked (off & out) by outer lines. *Boundary as dividing* — marked by all the divvying up, the way danger zones are prepositioned — '*you step over that line & you're asking for trouble*' — *privatizing property*, broadcasting a mirage of sovereignty, of ownership, but *without* granting actual (*internal*) authority. Because internal authority is never secure, never solid enough. It depends upon a relationship to the outside, to external contexts, which it usually has trouble admitting to. *Territorial markers and confinements, ghost towns, congested metropolis on a grid*. Readability underscores the openness.

2. What is the experience? The readability? The judgment? *Words divide* — micro-level: the vectors of possibles (meaning & weight & movement) ricochet outward. A centrifuge of words & syllables & letters.. Yet typically, at least in their normative [catalog] version, *lines unite*. This tilts toward containment, *a compact*, to slim down & centripetalize

& package up *a single reading, helping offer that overall intonational curve so useful for language-learning & memory.* Once you unify the perspectives [/the vectors], it enables [/empowers] a shutting down of time & materialized openness, a closure on the horizontal axis. *A constructed continuity you find your way through, to track & trail a 'power line,' piping to convey a fluid.* [Yet we could recast the verb 'convey' to underscore our subjection to constraint & fixing & imprinting, as it keeps time in line *in moves*, as if the reassuring *horizontal rows* are making regularity (or power lines) for us & of us.] As if to *create a loop or equivalences* — as in: our experience gets looped [the shadow of the eternal return]; our experience gets equivalented [the shadow of capital]. (Narrative, the cliché notion of how temporal closure operates.) To turn (at least potential) fluidity into *a static & isolating* [spatial compression — facilitated by freezing 'time' up] & *securing closure of purpose.* But not our purpose — we who are dwarfed. Readers, getting a fix, fixed at the intersection of space & time — as axes, as lines. *It makes for size.*

3. So, for a reading, what could set itself up as a different kind of apprehension & ground for judgment — as a countering, an unorthodoxy on [& of] lines of space & time? What would facilitate new starts: *Better, constant crease & flux, a radical discontinuity as lack, jeopardizes before & after, stop & start, a dynamic in fragments, suggesting an unmappable space, no coordinates, troubling us to locate ourselves in formal terms.* *Polyrhythms' spatial counterpart, lack of (regular, traditional) closure as generative, tensions restored. It foregrounds an artificial, constructed process, a de-natured measure of kinetic shifts, registers of differentiation. This pluralism of incident, refusing all packages — not 'cut to fit' — a luxurious anarchy, a fuller flowering or specificity of intenal rhythms & semantic redistributions.*

4. Let's consider a centrifugal experience for readers —an enabling of (a potentially critical) judgment. To point or be thrown outward, crosshatching & relativizing. *Lines everywhere* [versus 'any one where,' or: Take Me to Totalityville] to be readable *as patches or territorial/spatial orchestrations, skeleton of volume*, made fragile or abstracted down to *structure exposed* [imaginatively empowered] *inside-out*. Re[-ad-]vantaged — reading operations experienced in motion. [No longer just a presupposed (either passive or static, let alone eternalized) reception.] *Refusing the normatively linear & its discipline (and delineation) in favor of a constructed conversation —injecting heterogeneity inside* (to transform things: into *celebratory form*, into a *participatory regime*). *To erase* those previously imposed *boundaries*, to *break up compactness & containment*, *in favor of a difference & a less generic, more individualized interior*. In a context: the inside is also outwardly framed or hinged or directed, not nearly so based on claims or promises of an autonomy, or an autarky, *an internal legitimacy*. This is a judgment call.

5. *Yet*, what about social circumstance, or social matter? If we don't go 'all out' in our emphasis on reading experience, aren't we left with writing which is *still too self-enclosed* or seemingly self-legitimizing? *A formally 'contemporary' writing may propose the bogus immediacy of gesture as a codeless transparent revelation of the body, as if its markings were natural, neutral, to be taken for granted*. Because it's still claiming the autonomy of the text's body, the author's body — (or the silliness of imagining that these two, as if joined at the hip in some fancy celebration of freedom, can capture or map the social body). *Attention to a freer play of line, as formal course of writerly conduct ornamentally preening in its autonomy, may distract us from what's outside, from the regulatory limits & constraint of meaning as a horizon. Discontinuous breaks & patches can*

discombobulate the surface, but don't we want to get off the surface?: they can also be brought into the project of articulating an external context by embodying its complexities, with meaning's outer structure (language/society) as model and limit — & as ground for unlearning, contest & prescription. By readers. Self-governing is not free-floating — [that brand of formalism needs to be decommissioned] — instead: its value hinges on that contextual understanding of structures & systems of significance & their horizons. But that understanding is not guaranteed or even typical. It needs to be actively facilitated via readerly pressure & play. An explanation in action that keeps crossing the line into a politics outside (its articulation into contested hegemonies, fields of force) & bringing it back inside to challenge the constitution (and possibilities) of meaning as well as form. "That's not a line, that's an idea." That's not a writer's trophy; it's a reader's garden or maze.

ⁱ *italicized* material is the entire essay, "Lines Linear How to Mean," from a symposium, 'L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Lines' which Charles Bernstein and I edited about 20 years ago for the collection, *The Line in Postmodern Poetry*, Robert Frank & Henry Sayre, eds. (University of Illinois Press, 1988). The original short piece, like most of my early literary theorizing / conceptualizing, focused on production & its radical possibilities; the new 'version' highlights issues centered around reading & reception.