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STEPPING OUT AND STEPPING OVER

THE FIGURE OF HYPERBATON

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Hyperbaton, in Greek, means "overstepping," and in classical rhetoric it refers to an inversion or dislocation of normal word order. It's a figure I am particularly fond of for the small shock of artificiality it inflicts. In the twenty-first century we're still playing out an argument about modernism, a conflict between an aesthetics of estrangement from sense, and a counteraesthetics of clarity. Each generation since the early modernists – date it when you like, from Mallarmean obscurity or the Anglo-American fractious allusiveness of Pound and Eliot – has developed its own idiom to describe the contest. Eliot announced in 1921 in his essay "The Metaphysical Poets" that "modern poets must be *difficult*. . . . The poet must become more and more comprehensive, more allusive, more indirect, in order to force, to dislocate if possible, language into his meaning." In his essay "The Constant Symbol," Frost declared testily (of Pound and Eliot): "There have been works lately to surpass all records for hardness." Elsewhere, he complained about mystery in poetry: "And if they want it to be – if they've got some secrets, let them keep them." Roughly a century later in the United States the argument is reflected in competing claims to revelatory power by experimental poets on the one hand – say, the Language Poets, or more recently the neobaroque (Lucie Brock-Broido, Brenda Shaughnessy) – and on the other, poets who pride themselves on a talkative accessibility (say, Billy Collins, Tony Hoagland, and Sharon Olds, in their differing modes). Hyperbaton is one gesture among many that poets might use to produce an effect of strangeness, formality, and literariness. It has particular force when it appears in a poem whose general method tends toward norms of natural speech. Instead of illustrating hyperbaton in a poet of stylized eccentricity, like Gerard Manley Hopkins, I'd like to consider two poets who usually respect what Frost would recognize as sentence sounds.

Ivor Gurney, the English poet and composer, lived from 1890 to 1937. He came from a modest background: his father was a tailor. He fought in the Great War on the front lines in northern France, was wounded and hospitalized, sent back to battle, and gassed at Passchendaele. In June 1918 he suffered a mental breakdown. He had already published one book of poems, *Severn and Somme*, which came out in 1917 to good reviews. A second collection, *War's Embers*, appeared in 1919, but by this time Gurney was already unstable, bouncing between jobs (as a pianist in movie houses, church organist, tax clerk, farm laborer). In 1922 he was declared insane and placed in an asylum, and three months later he was transferred to the City of London Mental Hospital at Dartford, where he remained until his death fifteen years later, intensely productive artistically but prey to delusions, often psychotic. (Gurney was diagnosed with "delusional insanity." Long after the poet's death, the psychiatrist William Trethowan concluded that Gurney was schizophrenic, and Gurney's first biographer, Michael Hurd, repeated the claim. More recently, Pamela Blevins has challenged that diagnosis in *Ivor Gurney and Marion Scott: Song of Pain and Beauty*, arguing that Gurney suffered from a bipolar condition, which would explain his ability to keep composing poetry and music for many years in the hospital.)

Whatever he suffered from, Gurney continued to write poems. "Smudgy Dawn" appeared in *The London Mercury* in 1924, and Gurney placed it in his collection of poems *Rewards of Wonder*, finished in 1924 but not published until 2000.

Smudgy dawn scarfed with military colours
Northward, and flowing wider like slow sea water,
Woke in lilac and elm and almost among garden flowers.
Birds a multitude, increasing as it made lighter.
Nothing but I moved by railings there; slept sweeter
Than kings the country folk in thatch or slate shade.
Peace had the grey West, fleece clouds sure in its power –
Out on much-Severn I thought waves readied for laughter,
And the fire-swinger promised behind the elm-pillars
A day worthy such beginning to come after.
To the room, then, to work with such hopes as may
Come to the faithful night worker, in west country's July.

The poets of Gurney's generation whom he knew personally in literary London were the so-called Georgians: Edmund Blunden, John Masefield, Walter de la Mare. He was well aware of Edward Thomas; one poem starts, "It was after the war, Edward Thomas had fallen at Arras" ("The Mangel-Bury"). Gurney was not a modernist. He adored Ben Jonson; his ideal was clarity and harmony. Yet though his poems at times touch notes that sound Georgian – a sweet, metrically regular lyricism – Gurney's odd diction, subtle rhythms, and emotional intensity mark him as a poet of far greater energy and scope than the Georgians, one with a mastery equal to Thomas's, and a gift for nonmodernist strangeness. In "Smudgy Dawn," that strangeness is partly the effect of hyperbaton.

No figure of speech works alone. The hyperbatons in "Smudgy Dawn" collaborate with the poem's eerie, floating hexameters, with enjambments that imitate the flow the poem describes, and with phosphorescently original word choices. The hyperbatons occur in lines 5 and 6, 7, and 9 and 10. Lines 5–6 disrupt the normal order of subject and verb: "The country folk slept sweeter" is what we would expect. Line 7 may or may not invert subject and object in "Peace had the grey West": one could be tempted to read "The grey West" as the subject, peace as the object. In lines 9–10, the normal order of subject and object is interrupted – the Greeks would say "stepped over" – by the intrusion of a prepositional phrase: "And behind the elm-pillars the fire-swinger promised a

day," would be the conventional sequence. What do these slight artifices deliver?

The first line is a tour de force of visual suggestion. "Smudgy dawn": in the homely epithet, one sees the cloud streaks in the sky. "Scarfed," a past participle, has almost verbal force and increases one's sense of atmospheric disturbance. The military colors are not specified, but they intensify the sky with hints of strong chromatic blazoning, perhaps red. The first line, a hexameter, acts as a visual unit, but as it pours over into line 2, vision becomes movement, and the poem surges toward its first main verb, a verb of awakening: "Northward, and flowing wider like slow sea water, / Woke in lilac and elm and almost among garden flowers." Note the lengthening power of the long *i*'s in "wider" and "like," and the long *o*'s in "flow," "slow," "woke," and "almost." Note the extension flexed out in the mysterious "and almost." Line 4, a sentence fragment, contributes to the sense of flow and magnification in the imagery of the birds "increasing" and the day being "made lighter." Line 5 extends the action from the flowing dawn to the speaker-protagonist: "Nothing but I moved by railings there." The country folk, protected by their hyperbaton, have line 6 all to themselves to sleep in. The flow of dawn carries peace and promise into the mind of the speaker: "I *thought* waves readied for laughter." By this time, he sees the landscape as mystically transfigured: the sun has become a deity (the fire-swinger), and the trees a temple (elm-pillars). The *figure* of hyperbaton accentuates the mystery: in trans-*figuring* ordinary speech patterns, it transforms the scene from quotidian to visionary, and it builds suspense about the object of the promise. What has been desired? "A day worthy such beginning to come after." The last two lines, also a sentence fragment, answer the promise with an exhortation, perhaps a prayer: "To the room, then, to work," its energy precipitating the last, earnest enjambment, "with such hopes as may / Come . . . "

Gurney didn't always write so artificially; the opening lines of other poems show that: "The songs I had are withered" ("The Songs I Had,"); "Dawn brings lovely playthings to the mind" ("Lovely Playthings"). "Smudgy Dawn" has particular transformative work to perform, and its hyperbatons help pace and struc-

ture the transformation. It is all the more touching when one reflects on the immense discipline Gurney had to bring to his disordered psyche to create such lovely order on the page.

Frank Bidart, our contemporary, is an artist of free verse, and so must invent a new order to resist in each new poem. Bidart performs poetry as an agon, a crucifixion. He constructs many different crosses for himself, but often the essential form consists in a horizontal bar of ordinary speech nailed to a vertical of stylized, artificial language, and since he is a poet keenly sensitive to syntax, his work abounds in hyperbatons. Telling examples occur in "If I Could Mourn Like a Mourning Dove" from *Desire* (1997) and "Lament for the Makers" from *Star Dust* (2005).

If I Could Mourn Like a Mourning Dove

It is what recurs that we believe,
your face not at one moment looking
sideways up at me anguished or

elate, but the old words welling up by
gravity rearranged:
two weeks before you died in

pain worn out, after my usual casual sign-off
with *All my love*, your simple
solemn *My love to you, Frank.*

"If I Could Mourn" – one of several elegies Bidart wrote for the painter, writer, and collage-artist Joe Brainard – starts with a prosaic, generalizing statement: "It is what recurs that we believe." The tone is formal and intellectual. The next two lines plunge into a personal scene, also prosaic, unadorned by sound-play or imagery, a presentation almost naked, its power deriving from the tension between syntax and lineation and from the intensity of the scene described. A poem that seems neatly balanced, its single sentence occupying three tercets, grows more and more unbalanced. The negation is strangely placed. One would have expected "not your face . . . but the old words." Instead, it is "your face not at one moment looking," so one is not sure whether "not" modifies

the time of looking ("not at one moment") or the looking itself ("not looking sideways up at me"). The face of the dying man is either anguished or elate (perhaps both, at different times?), and the strong enjambment between tercets ("anguished or // elate") accentuates the contradiction.

In any case, the vision of the face has been summoned only in order to be dispelled, and the middle stanza focuses on words instead of vision, on the formulas for good-bye, "old words." The poem is *about* old, conventional words – "*All my love*" – and about those conventions being disturbed and personalized by the reality of death: "*My love to you, Frank.*" The poem enacts this disturbance by the two hyperbatons in the middle tercet, the obstructive placement of two prepositional phrases. "Old words welling up rearranged by gravity," we would want to say, and "Two weeks before you died worn out in pain." But no. Bidart's gravity rearranges the words, and hangs the intrusive prepositions out on the ends of lines like red flags on boards projecting from an overloaded pick-up truck: "but the old words welling up *by* / gravity rearranged," and "two weeks before you died *in* // pain worn out." After such strain, the poem's simple, final salutation – "*My love to you, Frank*" – is a moral discovery, an instruction in love in the face of death.

"If I Could Mourn" works from simplicity, through artifice, into a regained simplicity. "Lament for the Makers" proceeds in a sequence of syntactically straightforward statements to conclude in a display of artifice, a hyperbaton. A rewriting of William Dunbar's sixteenth-century lament and one of Bidart's many *artes poeticae*, this lament reworks Bidart's obsessive theme of excruciating personal experience ordered, if not redeemed, in the structures of art.

Not bird not badger not beaver not bee

Many creatures must
make, but only one must seek

within itself what to make

My father's ring was a *B* with a dart
through it, in diamonds against polished black stone.

I have it. What parents leave you
is their lives.

Until my mother died she struggled to make
a house that she did not loathe; paintings; poems; me.

Many creatures must
make, but only one must seek
within itself what to make

Not bird not badger not beaver not bee

*

Teach me, masters who by making were
remade, your art.

The poem is intricately designed, and flaunts not only a hyperbaton but an elaborate chiastic, or ABBA, structure in the italic sections that bracket the core. The lines in italics present a general thesis about making, distinguishing animal creativity ("*Not bird not badger not beaver not bee*") from human self-conscious creation ("*only one must seek // within itself what to make*"). The exaggerated alliteration on *b* prepares for the rather crude pun with which the father chose to represent himself, the name "Bidart" symbolized in the ring with "*B* with a dart / through it." That in turn leads to the mother's desperate making. The heart of the poem in roman type depicts the mess of inherited pain in the direct syntax of living speech: "I have it. What parents leave you / is their lives." And that section concludes in the snapping shut of the chiastic structure, the repeated line "*Not bird not badger not beaver not bee.*"

But the poem doesn't end there. After the pause marked by an asterisk, the lament breaks into a prayer to artifice, in the artificial form of the hyperbaton. Not "masters, teach me your art" but "Teach me, masters who by making were / remade, your art." It's an ambiguous address. The masters might be construed as the parents, but since they seem to be failed makers, the poet is more likely to be addressing the company of master poets invoked by Dunbar: Chaucer, Gower, Robert Henryson – an infinitely extendable list. In this prayer, Bidart has embedded his essential credo and paradox: this poet who made a name in his generation by

experimenting radically with prose values and creating illusions of raw experience is also a master of stylized and dislocated language, for whom remaking the self is inseparable from the making of figures of speech. In this case, chiastics, the cross, and hyperbaton. A stepping over: for Bidart, a stepping over from suffering squalor into comprehensive form. And a stepping over, within his surname, from "dart" to "art." (That step is invited by the pun on "to be": *bee,* the letter *B,* turn toward the verb of being by which the son remakes himself and perhaps qualifies himself for Dunbar's list of names.)

Figures of speech, by introducing visible artifice into poetic utterance, point up the fundamental tension in all poetry between experiential concreteness and formal abstraction. Richly expressive poems, I would argue, keep the tension tuned high and strung tautly. For Gurney, the musician, I feel the tension as a counterpoint between natural and unnatural word order. For Bidart, the agonist, I feel it as a hammered cross. In both cases, the conflict makes for the life of the art.