

## Reginald Gibbons

### HEMISTICHS

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In the late 1990s I worked with the late classicist Charles Segal for three years on translating Euripides' *Bakkhai*, the great tragedy of *fused* opposites and abolished distinctions—between male and female, city and country, human and divine, sane and mad, foreign and native. Translating the choral odes is especially perplexing. I decided on a syncopated short free-verse line, and produced as much music with it as I could.

Charlie and I spent the next two years translating Sophokles' *Antigone*, the great tragedy of *inalterably* opposed positions—of male and female, gods of the sky and gods of the earth, one-man rule and the wishes of a city, reverence for gods and disrespect of them, good counsel and stubbornly blind self-will. This time I started with the odes, only later working on dialogue of various kinds. And this time I worked the Greek lines into short half-lines in English, which mostly gave me space and time to render a whole Greek line in two of these hemistichs (but in a modern, not classical, sense: half-lines that do not necessarily have a pause, a caesura, between them).

Something was happening in my own writing at the same time, and it issued in two very different kinds of poems. One kind of poem was also in hemistichs, but I found myself giving them strict syllable counts, although not necessarily holding the same count for a whole poem. (That is, the lines might have variable length in a given poem, but each full line would have two hemistichs of the same syllable count, which ranged from four to eight.) This gave me a way to set a long sentence in English against a series of short lines that resisted the sentence as I worked at it, by requiring of it that it compress itself and organize itself into counted chunks, but at the same time the hemistichs freed the sentence to go on much longer than it might have, because they gave it another kind of organization. Syntax is a fundamental element of language. (Perhaps *the* fundamental element—not “representation.”)

But in opposition to this, I also started writing poems of four or five or eight pages, in lines with the greatest range of length I have ever used, from a word or two to a hundred words. My restlessness found two different outlets at once. This was because, I think, what I wanted to get hold of was two extremes of consciousness—at least as I was both experiencing and shaping it in poems. One is a very complicated weaving together of two or three strands of thought and narrative that took a while to complete, or to leave incomplete in a right way (the long poems); the other was a delicate attempt to balance one or two small ideas, perceptions, feelings against each other.

Both sorts of poems released energies. The long poems moved by association from one word to another, oscillating between and among the through-narratives of event or thought or feeling. Poems of a long, varied walk. The short poems moved by pushing the rhythms of the words closer together, as close as I could get them, which created a kind of dance on the toes, without moving very far.

The *ideas* in poetry are sometimes deep within language. These are the ideas that are not articulated explicitly, discursively, the ones that remain unstated because they are stances, attitudes of the poet, they're the ineradicable individuality of the poet's sense of love or war or sex or race, or anything on that elemental level, or toward language itself, toward poetry itself. (Well, I shouldn't say they're ineradicably individual—look at how much individuality so many societies eradicate or abort in their citizens, including our own society, which substitutes illusions of particular, superior allegiances for individual freedom of mind.) These deep-down ideas aren't necessarily interesting ones, even if they are very individual to the

poet. If a poet can see the ideas in his or her work, and if the poet doesn't end up even liking those ideas—which does happen—they can be escaped only by remaking oneself. Gradually. “The friends who have it I do wrong / whenever I remake a poem / should know what issue is at stake: / it is myself that I remake” (Yeats).

It has been so long since Western societies have entrenched the idea of the individual as an ideal that we are not capable of thinking in any other way; yet the ideal of individuality makes us vulnerable to manipulation in its own way—illusory choices, as I mentioned above, come to seem real, and real choices come to seem impossible and even undesirable. There's plenty written about all that.

In for all poets, the ground of being is in language. Both self and language have capacities that poetry makes more of, in all societies. In language, one of the most interesting is the “iconic,” in the sense that the word in the ear and mouth, and the word on the page (in different ways), can signify its word-ness, in addition to signifying whatever it represents (if anything). In this way it represents language being language, language as a thing in itself. This is most obvious when a word itself is like what it means, such as “buzz.” Or the fluttering effect of syllables in “butterfly.” Even though this is the “butter” (which comes into English ultimately from the Greek word for “ox” or “cow,” *bous*) that we eat, plus our familiar word for flying, the *OED*, while it cites an Old English word that can be compared to similar Dutch words, is uncertain about how this compound word came to mean what it means. It says, “The reason of the name is unknown: Wedgwood points out a Dutch synonym *boterschijte* in Kilian, which suggests that the insect was so called from the appearance of its excrement.”

Leaving aside the Dutch “butter-shit,” this authoritative uncertainty only leads me to think that something in the sound of the word has given it the force of perfect appropriateness for about a thousand years. (In Spanish, the word is *mariposa*, which comes from the name Mary and the verb for resting, that is, alighting, so it means, although this is scarcely ever heard: “Mary rests.” Look, there's a gold and black maryrests. And this word too is polysyllabic, and seems to be subtly iconic in the same way as “butterfly.” Yet the religious implication comes not inherently from the structure of the Spanish language but from Spanish culture; and culture turns out to individualize languages in very marked ways. French “papillon” is more straightforward: it comes from the Latin word for butterfly, *papilio*—again, polysyllabic. The Latin derives from Greek *pallō*, which has several different meanings suggesting rapid and varying movement.

The web site <http://butterflywebsite.com/articles/saybut.htm> gives the word for “butterfly” in more than two hundred languages, and many of these are clearly “iconic” in representing the creature by means of repeated syllables, just as wing beats are a repetition. This isn't onomatopoeia, since butterflies themselves make no *sound* that we can hear. But an “iconic” word doesn't need to be either onomatopoeic or more subtly related sonically to the thing it represents. The *OED* says that “There is... growing evidence that language contains many elements which are iconic—that is, imitative of non-linguistic reality.”

A word can be iconic simply in a linguistic way. That is: in the way some words and phrases present themselves to the ear, and in the way these or others present themselves to the eye when committed to writing, language produces emphasis on words themselves (and phrases). In Sophokles (and in Greek, where double letters are comparatively rare), there are different sorts of repetitions and doublings in the first strophe of the famous ode on man in *Antigone*, where the poet creates phonetic figures by repeating the syllable *an* (338-39), and by the doubled “l” in the word *illoménōn* (in this line, meaning to move back and forth with mules and plow), the doubled word *étos eis étos* (“year after year”), and the doubled letter in the word *hippeíōi*. (For the sake of the high diction in which “mules” would be an offensively everyday word, the mules are called “offspring of horses.”)

Historically, poetry has been the use of language, one might argue, that makes the most use of the most emphasis on language itself—not only in the form of individual words, but in all sorts of other aspects of language that we use every day in a non-aware way that makes language often seem “transparent.” But it’s not.

So then, what’s the poetic *idea* here that is produced by an iconic effect of doubling? First, it is only an extra emphasis on the unending human plowing back and forth across the field with the mules, which is both creative and yet also an affront to Gaia, the earth, whose body the human beings are scraping. (And now we populate an epoch which has deeply wounded not only earth but sky as well. Talk about offending the gods!) But second, it’s the ancient great idea of poetry itself, which by enacting an emphasis or an idea with doublings, implies—about poetry in general, and poetic language—that certain words can be used so as to *act* more powerfully than normal. We ourselves don’t need to credit a magical sense of language in this assumption in order to gain from it. Nor is this only a device of rhetoric, although naturally enough some poetic devices are used in rhetoric, too.

There are strains (in both senses?) of American poetry that reject the use of a meaning-making intensification of language. Or that reject meaning-making itself. Others reject syntax—which, in English, is dependent on word order to convey meaning—and the use of sonic or visual shaping (hemistichs, for instance). Others reject artistic intention. Others reject the rejecting of these elements I have just mentioned. Poetic practice is now in the midst of a flourishing of variety that exceeds anyone’s ability to comprehend it fully. I like the idea of the surprising continuities in poetic practice over the last maybe five thousand years. (Probably much longer than that.) Here and there we can see the glimmers of that continuity (hemistichs, for instance) and those glimmers I find interesting and encouraging. To me they suggest that poetic practice will live for as long as human beings do. (But Gaia will live longer.) And the glimmers also suggest that whole range of poetry is what matters, not this variety or that, this moment or that. Every poetic moment has felt it was the one by which all of earlier poetry could be judged, and even thrown away as useless. But none of these moments has proven to have had any such priority or excellence of judgment about the past or the future.