

PROSODY

by
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Moorhead, 27 May 1996

A KIND OF DEDICATION

Kind lovers, love on,
Lest the world be undone,
And mankind be lost by degrees:
For if all from their loves
Should go wander in groves,
There soon would be nothing but trees.
-- John Crowne

John Crowne

We returned from the groves
In our dribbles and droves
All repenting of scribbling squibs,
And as lovers loved on.
Now the world is undone
For the trees are all cut to make cribs.
-- dmh

FOREWORD

This book results from 25 years of attention to a single question: What makes some poetry last 400 years while other stuff is gone in 40 seconds? What follows are some of the answers.

A.E. Housman defined poetry as "the best words in the best order." He and countless others were also great practitioners of the best /sounds/ in the best order. There are a thousand ways to say the same thing. Many of them sound good in a particular instance, so why use

any of the rest?

The urge to create music is innate in man. It is one of my irks, that the meadowlark produces the same seven notes from dawn to dusk, birth to death, no matter the circumstance; one expects so much more of such a voice. The same of poetry. There is a "movement," recently, to excuse the poetaster of the effort of prosody by saying that it is "artificial." One "Resident Poet" took over one of my amateur classes, saying, "These days, the budding young poet does not have to be able to write a sonnet." Well, the official "grammar" text at his college had, as the thesis of its Introduction, the statement, "There is no such thing as correct grammar." It takes a whole quarter to learn /this/?

Language itself is artificial in every particular, however that it makes use, as it must, of natural sounds. The scream, bawling, laughter are "natural," and even the circumstances of laughter must be learned; and when we look, we find that not only has not the poetaster learned the fundamentals of prosody, he has not learned the fundamentals of language, either, for language is also, and in every element, a /convention/ agreed upon among two or more persons, and the poetaster writes of totally private "meanings" and "associations" through formulae whose sole authority seems to be something he finds in his navel.

The objection that prosody is "merely decoration" is made by those who know nothing about it, reading those who, like, say, Shelley, know nothing about it, either. Prosody properly used /directs/ the voice in how to say the piece, and this /manner/ of the saying goes far in reporting the poet's mood and reaction to the mere data without his having to interlard a perfectly good poem with psychological dissertation or the dialogue from soap opera -- as too many nonprosodic "poets" do. Indeed, this lyricism usually goes /farther/ in that report, recreating it in the reader as psychological jargon cannot. For the reader, too, is inclined to sing.

I take part of the idea for this book from Babette Deutsch, whose /Poetry Handbook/ I read 25 years ago and which, alas, is no longer in print: it was over 30 years old at the time. This book has both more and less

than hers; I think she beats me on kinds of stanzas. As I remember it, I beat her on techniques and in using my own poems to illustrate the stanza forms. (I didn't feel like keeping track of other people's royalties.)

I took other information from other old books full of poems and explanations, and made it all my own. I am saying that I am solely responsible for the content of this book, for all it does is to describe my own practice. That information is so ready to mind that I wrote this book in about three days, however it took 41 years to gather.

Often, I try not to, but then I capitulate and read what passes for poetry these days, published by people who should know better but, to be kind, probably don't receive the material they'd /like/ to publish.

I took Creative Writing. Twice. In neither instance did I learn a thing: I was already a better poet out of my own studies than the materials available to the course /could/ teach. /Or cared to/. In short, much has gone missing from the teaching, and therefore the craft, of poetry. This book is a small attempt to put at least some of that knowledge where the people who count -- the people who so want to write poetry they'll put their lives to writing without pay -- can get at it.

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THE PROTAGONIST

"A poet," writes Auden, "is one who is, before he is anything else, passionately in love with language. Whether this love is the gift itself or but the outward manifestation of the gift, it is the sign by which one recognises whether a young man [his specification] is potentially a poet or not." The New Testament agrees. The Greek /philosophios/, that lover of wisdom, began his education as a poet, a lover of language, for the latter is necessary to the former.

A poet will go without food (though not usually without coffee), without friends, even without a cat (again, not usually), in the pursuit of the way twenty

syllables, their meanings and their sounds, fit together. He will scribble himself into poverty and consumption in pursuit of his love. When he is an old man [my specification] people will finally figure out what he has done -- and ignore it. No matter. Like the song says, he has his love to keep him warm.

If he is writing for fame and fortune in addition to love, he must be willing to put eight hours a day into the process of writing, which includes a great deal of thinking, and is done alone in a room with the door closed. He may cut a hole in the door to admit the cat, but he may roam the house only if he lives alone.

If he is writing for fame and fortune alone, he should seek psychiatric help. Not only can one not sell poetry for cash, one can't even give it away for the time it takes to read it.

You may have noticed by now that I am Politically Incorrect. If you are not willing to be politically incorrect you are not willing to be a poet, for political correctness is not permitted to say anything of meaning in the few subjects of which it is permitted to say anything at all. However, if you wish to write solely to be politically or socially /incorrect/, forget it; we had enough of that in the 'Fifties, and the stuff has all gone to lunch already.

THE SUBJECT

A poem is, before it is anything else, an act of communication. As such, it is subject to cybernetic rules, ignored at your own peril: the time you wasted on what might have been a communication, and could have been a good one. It does not admit of random grammar, random syntax, or random juxtaposition of events to see what they produce (you're supposed to do that by thinking, and to identify what they have done before you begin to write).

A communication in a human tongue is a series of sounds made with the voice. Poetry is a communication

that has organised these sounds with perhaps as much attention as it gives their meanings.

To this end, a poem is a communication that /makes use of/ the line. It is not a prose communication or incommunication hacked at random into short segments. If you cut up a string of drool with scissors, it's not only still drool, but mere proximity of the pieces causes them to flow back together. And while this is extended metaphor, it is not poetry.

The line in poetry is delineated in itself and referred to other lines to create /more-or-less-regular periods/, not found in prose, by a particular use of sounds. This treatise deals primarily with that use of sound; thus, you will find only a small discussion here of the rhetorical figures, which are common to poetry and prose.

In poetry, sound establishes and enhances the line (not the converse). The line, theoretically of any length, even to that 87-page sentence of Joyce's, is found in English to establish a period that /feels good/ with three-, but especially four- and five-beat lines, seldom six, with seven broken into four-three, and with little departure from these. They carry as much sense as the average reader can sing, or digest in one byte, while providing the bricks of larger structures -- and that is what it is all about: communication.

Poetry lasts a long time by speaking of things, their relationships, and ideas, that last a long time, in language that doesn't go out of style. It doesn't go out of style because it /sets/ style, and other manners imitate it. Some think that /departing from style/ is setting style. This is not the case, nor any method of poetry however it might be a result. /Poetry might have been spoken by the average man, but wasn't/. Today's interpretation of that early Romantic dictum is to sound like the average man -- and get lost in the general noise because of it. This "poetry" /begins/ by apologising for itself, and should not gripe that it is instantly dismissed for doing so. Poetry may consist in the /words/ of the average man -- to include the average professional man -- but in the mouth of the poet they are words that have been taught to sing.

Today's reader doesn't read much and doesn't have

time to. Don't waste his time with tripe and padding, or he will waste yours by throwing your poem away, not only from hand but from mind.

Poetry does not assert to discover fire because the poet managed to strike his first spark. After three million years of fire and at least 40,000 of language and art, there is not a single new thing for him to write about: his only possible novelty is in statement and manner. One method of treating the event is to translate the experience into that of the first man to make fire. A better method is to relate it to /any/ man's striking a fire -- by any method including the thermostat.

Nor does poetry invent the wheel, though it may find a new use for one (rare).

Poetry sings of the things that were, the things that are, and the things that /could be/. If it only sings of things the way it wants them to be, it wastes its time, because the reader wants them to be some other way, and poetry is not a particularly convincing platform for argument.

THE PURPOSE

Over the seven millenia of written language and the 40,000 years of song, one of the highest functions of poetry has been to be exemplary. Homer and Keats understood this; Pope (except in the "Essay on Criticism") and Dryden did not. It is so much easier to harangue the reader /about/ virtue than it is to exemplify virtue, that the ratio of preachers to poets has remained at about 1000:1 throughtout history. (It is an interesting comment on the state of the listener that preachers have been about that much more popular -- and richer -- than poets throughout history, too, especially since preachers steal /all/ their material from a very few poets.)

The examples that follow are my own. I consider them exemplary, because I worked hard at them and because I know no other reason to write. Besides, I didn't want to mess about getting permissions and paying

royalties. You will judge the real reason for yourselves, and that, too is part of writing, /i.e./, being read -- and being judged for what you said and how you said it.

This book says nothing of what to say. "Poetic license" no longer refers to quirks of grammar and useage: a poet is expected to sing in the common tongue, which is fine. It is easily done. Poetic license today exists solely in respect of subject matter, which ranges in this Land of the Free from the most esoteric philosophy to the most routine contents of the sewer -- with the latter all too often outnumbering the former. But the only /sounds/ that win this battle are those that follow. They prove it with centuries of survival.

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THE FIGURES

In merely alphabetical order.

/address/ Address is always in the second person singular; all else is description, whether it is of yourself, another, or a thing. Anything, but usually the theoretical reader, can be addressed as "you" (as I am doing here). Sometimes, a descriptive poem without kick can be salvaged by address. If you address the /subject/ of the poem, it is one form of /personification/. Usually, to address the reader directly is the best way to get his attention, but be certain before you do this that you mean /him/, at least potentially, as "love poems" assert usually to mean to address the addressee. In any case, it is useless to wait around for an actual person to address; they never fit the requirements of the poem, either already knowing too much, or knowing too little and not caring to learn any more. Nobody can write poems actually to a specific individual: his circumstances and understanding are always too cramping, and a verse letter as a result is not really a poem, though real poems occasionally make use of the pretense of the verse letter. Make up a reader. Talk to him as you would /wish/ to talk to somebody. And get his opinions (as you made him up, you have to listen /hard/, or you'll only be talking to

yourself).

/antinomy/ Contradiction of a statement by and on its own terms. Unless used as an illustration of its error, it is always merely an error.

/amphibole/ A figure to be avoided unless you are seeking an irony or other pun, or illustrating the error in a voice other than your own. It is the use of the same word twice in a figure, the second or further use having a different meaning from the first. It is ordinarily an error. Amphibole differs from the pun in that the pun has two or more */correct/* meanings in a */single/* use.

/amphigory/ A figure faulty in definition, grammar, or syntax that, as a result of the fault, means nothing. Lear and Guest made extensive use of amphigory in their humorous verse, but only children and scholars, who experiment a lot with pure noise, are interested.

/chiasmus/ A rhetorical construction of the form abba. The Italian quatrain, but especially the ordering of image, clause, syntax, or argument in this form.

/circumlocution/ Literally, "talking around" a subject. There are two uses of circumlocution. The first is to talk on publicly or privately "forbidden" subjects anyway, and poetry does a lot of this. The second sort results when the poet simply doesn't know what he's talking about. It can occur in conjunction with the first.

/clich,/ The term means a printing plate, and refers to a metaphor used so often it has lost its zap, and possibly even its illustration. Most of the words in any language are clich,s; once a novel coinage, their meaning was so good they were absorbed into common useage. But poetry should not be plainsong, else there might be no reason to read it.

/epithet/ is calling a thing or act by another name entirely, one that has, unlike metaphor, simile, and symbol, nothing to do with the meaning of the thing or the movement of the poem. It is sometimes, but not

usually, used in place of Certain Words, forbidden among a particular readership (no words are "forbidden" to the poet, but this doesn't mean he should necessarily use them). To be sure, epithet can spice up what may otherwise be flat language, and flat poets use it to "rescue" flat subject matter because of this. But because it is like biting into a peppercorn, it is neither nourishing in itself, and usually makes you forget the rest of the meal.

To write, "the fleecy clouds" is metaphor: fleece is wool, and the clouds are suggested to be sheep. It is also completely hackneyed, unless you extend the metaphor and continue to treat the clouds as sheep in some sense. But to call clouds "Phoebus' sheep" is epithet, and makes the reader so struggle for the gist of what Phoebus has to do with the poem that he neglects even what he has got out of the piece so far. In short, epithet definitely announces itself, but like a hammered thumb.

/extended metaphor/ Opposed to simple or single metaphor, this extends description of the tenor by further use of the vehicle within the meaning of both. See */metaphor/*.

/hyperbole/ The exaggeration of action, classification or quality to the point of ridiculousness. It finds use in humor and satire. To say "Bill is an ox" is both metaphor and hyperbole.

/irony/ A figure in which two meanings of a word, object, syntax, or situation contradict each other, usually with bad consequences for one of them. In */tragic irony/*, the meaning that caused the tragedy is false, even if the other was true. See */pun/*.

/metaphor/ A figure always consisting in the */tenor/* or thing meant but not stated, and the */vehicle/* or thing indicated, the thing actually said. The two must necessarily have both a causal and a linguistic connection, or the result is a mere */epithet/*.

/meter/ is what */results/* when mostly-like feet (q.v.) are strung in rows of two (dimeter) to seven (heptameter)

(meters outside these parameters are quite rare) and spoken aloud. The effect approaches chant, but isn't. Meter is strictly subordinate to meaning and the words that achieve it. Words -- and grammar -- chosen to make the meter come out are not poetry, but doggerel (even when the Masters do it). Meter is a framework on which to hang the sound of the line; if the sound is too taken with itself to notice the framework, neither will anyone else. If the framework is used as a straitjacket, to force accent where it doesn't belong, nobody will notice the meaning, if indeed there was any, because the /words/ so distorted will have acquired a foreign pronunciation to which the reader will give all his attention. The accents of poetry are the accents of human speech, not drum cadence, but this doesn't mean that anything that comes out of the mouth is poetry because it has the accents of speech. Mostly, it isn't. Poetry approaches music in having rhythm without pitch; the closer, the better. Note however that most music -- even marches -- is not a stream of unrelieved monotony of rhythm.

Western poetry has used two bases for its rhythms: /quantity/ and /stress/. Which is used depends on which the language itself uses. The quantities (durations of the syllable) in Greek and Classical Latin (but not Vulgar Latin) are quite regular, and form the basis of Classical Meter. The quantities of modern western tongues, while they exist, are utterly irregular, and cannot form the /basis/ of meter, though they are most cleverly used to /vary/ its otherwise monotony; most western languages use the regular variation of /stress or relaxation/ of the syllable. Oriental poetry does not have regular rhythm, for it has neither regular quantity nor regular stress, though it sometimes /counts/ the syllables in the line.

/objective correlative/ The naming of an emotion by describing the conditions under which it obtains. These conditions cannot be wholly private, but must be available to the reader, and usually to his immediate memory.

/oxymoron/ Contradiction of the noun by its adjective or the verb by its adverb. Unless used as an illustration of the error, or in /hyperbole/, it is always merely an error. /E.g./, "supernatural" is an oxymoron, for universe

bounds itself, and has no "outside."

/parody/ The mimicking of the form, style, or content of a (well-known) piece of literature, to say something else entirely, or merely to make fun of the original. Carroll's "Father William" is better-remembered than Wordsworth's "Resolution and Independence," which it parodies.

/pun/ A figure in which a sound, word, grammar, syntax, or situation has two or more meanings, both of which are correct in the milieu of the figure, and which ultimately support each other. Opposite of */irony/*.

/quantity/ The amount of */time/* it takes to say a syllable, e.g., "couple" has nowhere near the quantity of "occlude." Crucial to Greek and Latin meter, it is simply not scanned in English verse, which is structured by */stress/*, though it does much, when controlled, to hurry or retard the line.

/sarcasm/ A figure that makes a point by the */manner/* of stating its opposite. The use is rather restricted in poetry (written language generally) for that few mannerisms can be coded in written language, being rather more stance, grimace, tone, and gesture.

/simile/ Usually defined as a comparison using "like" or "as," actually a */metaphor/* in which tenor and vehicle are alike in only one particular.

/substitution/ is the replacing of one (or more) of the regular metrical feet (q.v.) with another, usually a two-beat foot for two-beat foot, a three-beat for a three, though substitution of an anapest (3) for an iamb (2) is also common. There are particular feet that are most amenable to substitution, namely the first and the penult, though it is the rhythm of the */phrase/* that determines even this, as well as substitution elsewhere. Substitution */must/* not destroy the period, and should not destroy the movement of the line. Only your ears know if substitution has succeeded or not. Generally, if the line is difficult to recite in a natural tone, the substitution does not belong.

/symbol/ A vehicle whose tenor is never stated (though it may be referred to obliquely), but which, in the public milieu or that of the poem, is made to stand for the tenor. Unlike metaphor, the connection between tenor and vehicle of a symbol is often first developed by the poem in which it is asserted.

/synecdoche/ A comparison or emotion understated to the point of being ridiculous. This can be very effective in dealing with the otherwise overwhelming.

/vagary/ Any vehicle that fails accurately or unambiguously to indicate its tenor. Also, any word or syntax that fails to indicate its meaning.

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THE SOUNDS

Euterpe holds the lyre. On that foundation the Greeks begot lyric poetry. We have been trying to emulate them ever since, usually without the least notion of what they were about. They were about /sound/.

Before it remembers words, the ear remembers sounds. As poets, we must rediscover that state we knew at two and three, when we remembered and used words solely for their noises, not yet having attached an othersensory reference to them. Use of sound more than anything else will induce the reader to remember what we have said -- because his ear will remember /for/ him, even without proper attention on his part.

Toward this end we name only two kinds of sounds in English, but poetry can make use of both. Oriental languages add /tone/ and many Mediterranean languages add /quantity/, but in English these do not contribute to the grammar, and affect the prosody only marginally. English has 29 useable vowels (Shaw claimed 41, but I can't find them; maybe he referred particularly to /British/ vowels, of which there are more) and 48 distinct consonants. My Electric Rhyming Dictionary, under construction for 26 years, makes use of these numbers; it is in fact where I got them. If you try to use the

numbers you learned in fourth grade -- five and 21 -- your poems will fail of melody and the resulting clangor will be discarded.

Here are the only tricks we have to achieve sound and period in any form of poetry. The existence of these sonic relations means that you subvocalise the act of creation with every word, to accept or reject it on introducing it to its would-be fellows. It means that you do it many times per line and stanza. It means that you must be able to hear not only what you have said but how you have said it. Since even a "tin ear" can do this, it can be done -- and must be done for every poem. Eventually, it becomes easy.

/assonance/ is an identity or similarity in the sound of the principal vowels of different words. It is used within the line to give it sonic weight, and across lines to link parts of ideas. Identity of sound establishes groups of words. Similarity of sound links them. Thus, a group of a's will be linked to a group of o's if the sense gives the sound the least chance to do so.

/consonance/ is an identity (no similarities permitted) of consonants */within/* two or more words. Linkage by consonance must be accompanied by linkage of sense.

/alliteration/ is the identity of the */initial/* consonants of two or more words. Again, this link should reinforce a link in sense or period. It is so powerful a sound that it can sound ridiculous; be careful unless you are writing satire or parody. The attempt to write the alliterative Anglo-Saxon prosody (four beats, the first three alliterated on the stress), fails generally in that modern English grammar has too many syllables for an inflective technique. Old High Anglo-Saxon poetry got itself said in about nine syllables to the four-beat line; the same line in modern English requires as many as 16 syllables, and merely dilutes the alliteration and the period. A sad loss to the art, for that old poetry can rattle wine bottles.

/meter/ is an identity or similarity in the rhythm of a series of words or a sequence of lines. The art of meter is called */scansion/*, and it is very formal. However, the final analysis is what it */sounds/* like, */not/* what it

/looks/ like or how it /counts/. Meter can establish, reinforce, or destroy period. It can enhance the sense -- or ridicule it. It can read and speak like common speech despite being completely regular -- or it can break your idea into a ridiculous trot that hares off on its own. As in all aspects of prosody, /your ears/ are the judge.

/period/ is that feeling had when speaking or singing, of starting here and ending there. It ordinarily coincides with the taking and recitation of a breath, an act usually called a phrase. Period in language and song coincides with the phrase. A longer and stronger period takes a sequence of phrases as a sentence. A still longer period, that must be supported with the sound tools available, is the paragraph or argument, in poetry the /stanza/. It has a definite beginning, an indeterminate length subject to choice based on need, and a definite ending. The four techniques above can all, often singlehandedly, establish or destroy period.

/(masculine) rhyme/ is an identity, between two or more words, in the /sound/ of the principal vowel (regardless of spelling) and all consonants that follow it (regardless of spelling), as well as a difference in all material that precedes the identity. Rhyme that occurs at the ends of lines is called, strangely enough, "end rhyme." It is the single most powerful instigator or destroyer of period in English.

/N.B./ The use of a rhyming dictionary is actually mandatory to writing rhymed poetry, because you can't think of rhymes while you're thinking of meaning. You can switch rapidly back and forth, however, provided you have something to switch /to/. You have on one hand the poem; on the other hand must be a list of words that can be used, among which you select. This dictionary may begin in your own list of words (you run through the alphabet, trying to make rhymes) scribbled in the margin of the stanza. When you get tired of this, you buy or write a permanent rhyming dictionary, either paper or electronic, and continue to add to it as you use it. Eventually, you will come to think in rhymes; all it requires is knowing a lot of words and what they sound like.

/double rhyme/ is that in which the final stresses of two ending words meet the criteria for rhyme, above, /and/ are followed by one or more identical unstressed syllables. The effect, if not cared for, can be comic. Not to be confused with feminine rhyme.

/feminine rhyme/ is that in which the final stresses of two words do /not/ meet the criteria for rhyme, above, but are followed by one or more identical unstressed syllables.

/linked rhyme/ is that in which the secondary rhyme of a stanza provides the primary rhyme of the following stanza, as in /terza rima/ and the /virelay/, /q.v./

/slant rhyme/ is that in which the final vowels of two ending-words differ, usually not markedly, while the final consonant is identical between them. This is more effective within the line than it is at the end, though experiment continues. It is sufficiently weak that it cannot establish period by itself, though it has a pleasing effect of "natural speech" when coupled with regular phrasing to establish it.

/comic rhyme/ is always masculine or double, and bends the pronunciation of the final vowel and/or consonant in one or more ending-words to suit the pronunciation of a previous word. The technique has seen wide, if sparse, use; /cf./ Byron's /Don Juan/, in which "Juan" itself is an example, while the technique recurs throughout.

/stanza/ should be established by period in both formal and free verse. Rhyme, if used, should distinguish a period and its parts, including the stanza and its parts. Thus, it is extremely difficult practice to start with a stanza and see what ideas it can come up with, though it can be done; for some stanzas, it /must/ be done. Rather, let an idea establish a few periods, and see what stanzas might fit them. This trial period disappears with a little practice.

/compensation/ is the dropping of the initial unstressed syllable of a line (catalexis) if the final foot of the

preceding iambic or anapestic line has added an unstressed syllable in a double or feminine rhyme. The catalexis prevents a hiccup in the rhythm; however, to leave the extra syllable in the second line can establish the beginning (never the end) of a period. The choice is yours.

/doggerel/ is the use of these tactics without a purpose beyond stringing noises together, that is, without much or any meaning. Carloads of doggerel were written in every generation. So what. More recently, carloads of noises are being strung together /without/ these techniques. Again, if you don't do it yourself, so what? History, beginning with you, will ignore the stuff.

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THE SYLLABLES

ca = ' Catalect, the empty syllable, a pause, unsounded, a substitute beat for a sounded syllable.

It takes the metrics that it substitutes.

ar = - Arsis, anacrusis, or breve;
In modern European meter, the unaccented syllable;
In Latin, but especially in Greek meter, the short syllable.
In English, one beat; in Greek, one beat.

th = / Thesis, ictus, or macron;
In modern European meter, the accented syllable;
In Latin, but especially in Greek meter, the long syllable.
In English, one beat; in Greek, two beats. It is for this reason that the Classical meters do not translate into English, but must translate as prose or be rewritten into English verse.

h = " No formal name;
In modern European meter, the half-stressed
syllable; it can be scanned as an arsis
or thesis at need.
It has no counterpart in Latin or Greek
meter.
In English, one beat.

/N.B./ I said above that quantity in English is not
important to its prosody. This is because quantity is
/almost/ completely overwhelmed by stress, and because
there is no necessary relation between the two.
Nevertheless, the syllables of English /do/ have quantity,
and it is not the simple one-beat-two-beat quantity of the
Greek: it is variable. Listen for quantity, and learn
which words have which quantities, for /short/ syllables
speed up the foot and line, and /long/ ones can make it
anywhere from laid-back to downright belabored.

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THE FEET

py = -- pyrrhee, an accidental
ia = -/ iamb
tr = /- trochee
sp = // spondee, in English a two-beat
accidental, in Greek a four-beat,
very-regular foot
tb = --- tribrach, an accidental
an = --/ anapest
ab = -/- amphibrach
da = /-- dactyl
cr = /-/ crete, amphimacer (macron)
1p = /--- first paeon
2p = -/-- second paeon
3p = --/- third paeon
4p = ---/ fourth paeon
li = --// lesser ione
ch = /-/- choriamb

di = /-/- ditrochee (see trochee)

gi = //-- greater ione

In Greek the rather common choriamb has six beats; in English it has but four. The only feet whose meter translates from Greek to English are the pyrrhée and the tribrach, which are substitute feet in both tongues, never regular, and seldom found in either.

The iamb and trochee, so common to both, have in Greek three beats and in English two. Thus, even the large number of words that have been taken directly from Greek to English forbid the translation of Greek /prosody/ into English /prosody/ for that they do not under any circumstances translate the same number of /beats/ from Greek to English.

/Substitution/ or /accident/ is the replacing of one foot by another in an otherwise regular line.

In Greek, substitution, if it exists at all, /retains the number of beats in the foot/, thus the number of beats in the line (this poetry was much danced to, and without instrumental support to speak of). Thus, a paeon (five beats) may substitute or be substituted by only another paeon or the amphimacer, while the spondee (though only two syllables, four beats), may substitute or be substituted by the anapest, the amphibrach, or dactyl (each of three syllables but four beats).

In English, substitution is quite a complicated affair that must be /listened for/ quite as much as it is looked at, for any single-stressed foot may substitute any other single-stressed foot, while, /at the same time/, any two-syllable foot may substitute any other two-syllable foot, so that the two-stress spondee often substitutes the one-stress iamb, while in the same line the three-syllable, but one-stress, anapest is substituting another iamb. What makes this complicated is that English exhibits stresses, half-stresses, and partial stresses, as well as unaccounted long and short syllables, and each of these contribute to the overall timing of the /phrase/, which some preach to be the true root of English prosody; it is not. The phrase is what /results/ from prosody; it does not /cause/ it.

The Greek prosody that we have was known to be

in existence for some 5000 years as a strictly oral/aural tradition by the time we have it recorded in Homer; by contrast, our own "Classical" Period is only 200 years old, and was preceded by a shakedown period of less than 400 years between the currency of /Beowulf/ and the /Eddas/ (of High Anglo-Saxon prosody, having absolutely nothing in common with the invading European prosodic forms) and the rise and circulation of Chaucer, who (first?) established English prosody. By this, I mean that our very /language/ is still in the process of shaking down, and this fact, for better or worse, carries our rules of prosody with it: we are still /finding out/ what we can do, which means, "what we can get away with."

-=-=-=-=-=-

SOME CLASSIC LINES

It must be noted immediately that in Greek it is the /line/ that is regular, and not, as in English, the repetition of a given foot. Note in any of the following the power developed by the /rhythm/ of the /line/ (the macron always takes two beats!). Note, /e.g./, the founding of the elegiac couplet on a six-beat line with a caesura at the end of each and the middle of the second; both are hexameters. That the macron takes only one beat in English gives a wholly different effect if the same lines are transplanted into it, and, in short, they simply don't "work."

Classical hexameter

The line is composed of unlike feet each having four beats. This bears /no/ relation to the routine iambic (12-beat) hexameters of Pope, which need no caesura at all, nor the routine-if-often-caesuraed dactylic (17-syllable, 18-beat) hexameters of Longfellow, which sometimes get away without caesura: the extreme length of the 24-beat Greek line /always/ has the caesura, and it is part of the grammar of the line.

elegiac /-/--//--//--/-/

elegiac couplet /-/-/-/-/-/-/
/-/-/-/-/-/-/

hendecasyllabic /-/-/-/-/-/

(The effect is totally different from Frost's "hendecasyllables" that make a sonnet about a hen; indeed, the sonnet is quite impossible to Greek, and was invented with modern Italian, which, while it retains quite a bit of quantity, has become a language of stressed prosody.)

sapphics 3(/-/// --/!/), /-//

THE STANZAS

Notes on the stanza codes:

The numbers heading a line of description indicate only the hierarchy of the outline; their sequence does not indicate any preference in authority or art of one form over another.

Small letters code the rhyming of lines; this may be masculine, feminine, slant, assonant, or alliterative. An "x" indicates that the line doesn't rhyme with another; a type of rhyme, once chosen, should be continued and not mixed.

The numbers associated with the code for a metric foot give the number of feet in the line. Where numbers appear with the line rhyme codes within a stanza definition, that line and those following have the indicated number of feet, until changed by another number.

Capital letters in the French forms code the /exact repetition of whole lines/, which must rhyme with lines coded by the corresponding small letter or primed capital. A variance perhaps not original to the forms may be had by altering the grammar of the repeated lines; a like

variance may be had by using exact homonyms.

ALEXANDRINE

1. A single line, i.e. 6, closing any stanza written in iambic pentameter, and substituting its last line. Popular in the Greek, it is rather unwieldy in English, but does, because of the rhythmic stretch, put a period to the end of a stanza.

ANGLO-SAXON PROSODY

1. $tr+da+1p$ irregularly admixed 4, alliterated $aaax$.

The only fitting example we have of this is */Beowulf/*. It cannot be read by a reader of modern English, save only unless he has studied Old High Anglo-Saxon, which he learns almost solely to read this poem (I understand it's worth it). Because its grammar is */inflective/*, it packs a lot of meaning into a few words: in the common case, twenty words of English are needed to translate eight or ten powerful substantives strung together by the poem's sentences. Because A.S. grammar is inflective, the vowels so important to rhyme cannot be subordinated to the sound without destroying the grammar, and A.S. prosody does not use rhyme. Instead, it uses consonance, particularly the triple alliteration that is the most immediate hallmark of A.S. prosody, and four strong beats, to establish a line. (It must have been quite the party music.) There is more to it than that; quantity and period enter the equation, but these are not evident save in the original tongue.

Because A.S. grammar is inflective, the position of a word in the line does not matter, the alliteratives can be moved to the first three beats of the line to suit the prosody. This form is difficult in English, whose grammar is */distributive/*, such that the order of words is the most important thing about the line, and any departure from that order is recognised immediately as subliterate.

The form, so strong in A.S., is weakened in English primarily because our stressed words do not usually have

the strong meanings found in A.S., do not have the quantity, and their emphasis dissipates in the double to triple number of words needed to express the same meaning in English.

Ultimately, that A.S. is primarily a chanting language says nothing against the fact that English is primarily a singing language. For myself, I prefer it that way.

BALLAD

1. abab cdcd efef ... ia 4343.

I Got to Walk

I closed the office at half past five
 (My day's work being done),
And caught a snowfluff kitten
 Rolling away the sun.

I had no car to carry me
 Through this witch-kitten's brew,
So I settled my muffler closer
 And set shoe ahead of shoe.

And as I walked, I wandered back
 Past yesterdays I'd known
And found this snow like all the rest
 The wind had ever thrown :

Sometimes light, or else so thick
 The road can't be discerned;
But whether wet or dry, once dropped
 It couldn't be returned.

But this was fair-to-middling snow
 On a fair-to-middling day,
That only would be thought of as
 The first that came to stay :

...

2. xaxa xbx bxcxc ... ia 4343

See "Common Meter."

The ballad is one of several forms most excellent for long poems provided the meter is not allowed to gallop. If it is necessary to slow the movement, include spondees for iambs or substitute the half-stress for the arsis in as many feet as possible. Should you wish to speed the line, substitute anapests or pyrrhics for iambs.

BALLADE

1. 3(ababbccdcD), l'envoi: ccdcD; ia 5(4).
2. 3(abaBbcbC), l'envoi: bBcC; ia 5, (an 4).

Night Train

When the ice is released on the river to crush
And the river released on the land
Comes the crooked express in a waver and rush
And no one to raise them a hand.
And they dawdle with little but dottle and strand
Between the horizon and me,
For the geese are returned to the promise of land
That promises not to agree.

Low over the stoop and the stubble they stutter
Strung out in a long allemande,
Amassed in a gaggle to cast for their butter,
And no one to raise them a hand
For the calendar, clock, and a stick and a string
Have fathered a foolish decree
That gathers the geese to fly south in a spring
That promises not to agree.

Allow that the love of the fool is more clever
Than faith of its mountains of sand
And the lot that they leave to the love of the lever
With no one to raise them a hand,
For the river lets go of both garbage and brand
And the seasonal still referee

Whatever shed feathers as season command
That promises not to agree,

But out on the heather the feathers will be
With no one to raise them a hand,
For faith and the feather will father a land
That promises not to agree.

The essentially-French ballade, not ever to be confused with the English ballad (see the prosody of each), is always of fixed length and format. It is most lyrical in anapestic meter, but this is a meter /much/ easier done in French than in English. The required repetition of whole lines is hard to work around, but yields an effect that can't be got any other way. If these lines will not submit to variance of grammar, try varying their reference.

BLANK VERSE

1. ia 5, unrhymed.

Gargoyle

I am the Sundays; package of eight decades
Sticky with the sauces of the sword,
Being read to by a little girl
Armed from church.

She has no language in her any look,
But reads to me what she has often learned
In the order she has often learned it.
In her the word unsaid will never speak,
Commit no age.

Her friends, her fashions, chosen by her friends,
The one because they think that they have heard her;
The one because she thinks that she has heard it;
Having no face. Her memory of face
Fades with her resentment that face
Should make design what she presumes in fits,

As fast forgets.

Her eyes are guiltless

/how should she have guile

who never sought the sticks beside the path

the /punji/ advertised unfit for travel/

And she intones her news sincerely; baths

Have washed off all the gook she found revolting

...

To avoid monotony, periods other than the line must be established through alliteration, assonance, consonance, and grammatical and syntactical structure. In the example, longer periods are terminated by two-beat lines, making this something other than "pure" blank verse. Extended metaphor establishes still longer periods and may encompass the whole poem.

For one kind of master use of blank verse, see the plays of Marlowe and Shakespeare (the histories in particular are full of high sentence); for a rather different master use, see Milton.

CHANT ROYAL

1. 5(ababccddedE), l'envoi: ddedE; ia 5(4)

CHAUCERIAN

1. See "Rime Royal," cf. /Troilus and Cressidye/.
2. ababcc ... ia 5, cf. /Canterbury Tales/.

Please see Chaucer for master variations of these forms.

CINQUAIN

1. Five lines in 24682 /syllables/,`unrhymed.
Cf. Haiku; but the form has far too many syllables for haiku subject or manner.

The only one to use this form much is "H.D.," who invented it. Please see her work.

COMMON METER

1. xaxa ... ia 4343
"Fourteener" /q.v./, printed in four lines.
- b. See also "Ballad."

COUPLET

1. Any two lines rhymed aa.
2. a. Heroic couplet: aa, ia 5, closed, as most of Pope's. In these the sense, grammar, period, and rhyme coincide. Thus, longer poems in this stanza can easily become monotonous unless rescued by the sense. See Pope.

Descartes

How odd that we should know that you have died
Who, when you said you thought you lived, but lied.

b. aa, ia 5, open or run-on, in which the sense and grammar are often made to avoid the rhyme, carrying the period over several stanzas. This form is far more suitable for the long poem, as the closed couplet is still available for emphasis within it. The best examples of the type are to be found in Dryden.

Night Watch

Three o'clock. My keys. My beeper. Rounds
Allow their sleep to occupants and grounds.
Now cave of basement : pillar, pulse, and core.
The salty breath of gypsum from the floor.
New pipes and water heaters. Hods. The tracks
Of plaster surgeons.

In a footing, cracks.

I feel a heartbeat stutter into shale

To apprehend the rending of the veil :
Three stories settling in the strata's mouth,
Slowly following the sabre-tooth.

Why should the time-pressed sediment erase
That close on midwatch, suddenly your face
Appears above your sandwich-cutting board,
Meticulously settling this hoard
Of care for my least tastebud into place
About the corners of my writing case?

c. Final or closing couplets are found at the ends of the Spenserian, Shakespearian, and Fishhook sonnets (q.v.), where they ordinarily sum or rebut the argument given by the body of the sonnet.

CYCLA RIMA

1. abc bcd cde (...) dea eab, ia 5.

CYCLA SONETTA

1. abc bcd cde dea ea, ia 5.
2. (See "Sonnet" below.)

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Why when I pick at those sweet songs of clout
Does sense retreat from sedatives of sound
And every soup-and-amble afternoon
Demand a twelvemonth that our sense be found?
If every word obliterate the moon,
A god cannot forget but only dance
The perfect figure to a perfect tune,
But perfect figure is a circumstance
That danced your scents until your sighing sylph
Became the wind with but a backward glance.
And that become a bloom that swayed at Alph,
Your apple hit my head and knocked me out,

Left my howl animal to name itself
And wake me to the calculus of doubt.

FISHHOOK

1. aabccb ... ia 442442, 553553, 552552

I put the name of my Academy to these forms,
despite that some others have used them before me
(especially Auden, who didn't invent them, either),
because they have no names otherwise, and need one.

/En Apxh/

"Things fall apart, and what rough dream
Now slouches toward its Bethlehem?"

The poet quoth,
Who pray the lord his soul to keep
Two million years of stony sleep --
But here are both.

What shudder in the soothing loam
Pop forth this child so far from Rome
With other wrongs?

Here from the breccia there pokes
Another of our daddy's jokes,
Who speaks in Taungs.

Old fogey. Prodding at the dense,
But who, for all your eloquence
Despises phones:

The eons come, the eons go,
And still, what you want us to know
You write on stones.

For thou art rock and fortress, art
In stone the stone that dangled Dart
Across the rand

To come wherever you had drawn
And made your face to shine upon
Your servant's hand.

...

2. aaabab ... ia 444242, 555353, 555252
3. aaabcccb ... ia 44424442 55535553

Bittern Complaint

Blessings on thee, little fellow,
Sooty bird in sky of yellow:
You sit in dying trees and bellow
 About our gases;
Insecticides have done quite well
With oil slicks and industrial smell
At sending Robins straight to hell
 In wholesale masses.

Sulfur plumes invade the space
And freeways field a daily race
Where the Heron once fished with grace
 At Lake Calhoun;
From paper mills' mercuric grime
And DDT's residual crime
This world will be, in little time,
 A plaster moon.

...

The repetition of rhyme in couplets and triplets can approach or exceed harangue, which is followed by the truncated line whose grammar, syntax, and rhyme can give the reader whiplash. The form is best suited to political, social, practical, or personal satire.

FOURTEENER

1. aa ... ia 7
 Properly, fourteen syllables per line.
- b. See "Common Meter."
- c. See "Ballad."

FREE VERSE

1. As established by Pound and Eliot, free verse has
 - a. A regular metric line with standard variations, but the metrics of a line are not necessarily those of its neighbours;
 - b. Irregular use of true and slant rhyme, these appearing not at random but so as to coincide with the period of the argument;
 - c. Irregular use of stanza, such that a formal or informal stanza is usually unlike its neighbors;
 - d. Extensive use of assonance, consonance, and alliteration to support period.

Encounter

I

A gray wedge stutters at the edge of sight
Beyond two windows only known by quiet.
A metered sip of gasoline
Engages in the tubes of my machine
The hurricane : one to fifteen,
Second after second in proportion;
Hour on hour, rolling out our question.
Night-stunted sight strains after changing shadows
Event has traced behind prescription windows :
And I must guess; and I must guess
The shape and source of each caress,
The thickness of the glass, and its distortion.

Behind my eyes the ions come and go
Recalculating /chiaroscuro/.

...

The couplet is, yes, a blatant allusion to Eliot, and appears again later in the poem (see "refrain"). Another line that appears severally is

"The road is longer than a six-volt highbeam.",

which is used sufficiently to acquire the power of symbol.

Unfortunately, their myriad followers are aware only

of what Pound and Eliot did /not/ use (/i.e./, regular stanzas), and consequently use essentially nothing. The resulting prose, cut at random into short or long lines, does not constitute poetry and is usually pretty poor prose. Since this condition has been true throughout history, and good poetry has always survived it, it doesn't bother me however it used to. And I have played with it myself, ordinarily to meet the submission deadlines of Creative Writing courses, but I have nothing I can consider exemplary out of the process.

N.B. Pound wrote, in 1952, that the /vers libre/ "movement" had run its course in only fifteen years from its inception (in 1915), and that its modern "followers" were practicing none of its principles. To see those principles exemplified, read the /Collected Poems/ of both Pound and Eliot -- their methods differ markedly, however their purposes do not. Nobody since has come up to them.

As an example of "free verse" in the modern style, this:

go ahead and talk about
artists who refuse to speak to you
they know exactly what you want
no matter what you say
this is the year of the spider
don't try to convince anyone
that this was the dress rehearsal

Please. The /only/ interesting thing about this poem is that it was "written" /by my computer/, fulfilling a prophesy I made 25 years ago.

HAIKU

1. Three lines of 5,7,&5 /syllables/ not feet
 - a. unrhymed xxx,
 - b. rhymed axa.

goose had a notion
now under wide whistling wings
pacific ocean

2. In English, three lines of /less/ than 5,7,&5 syllables
(see discussion).

- a. unrhymed xxx,
- b. rhymed axa.

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the spider too
circles these papers
finding no meat

This second or English form results of the fact that 17 syllables of English contain more words than 17 syllables of Japanese. Therefore the poem contains more things, activity, and/or ideas than the form is supposed to. For a really workable exposition, see Henderson, Harold G. /An Introduction to Haiku/. Garden City, NY: Doubleday Anchor Books; 1958.

DON JUAN

1. abababcc, ia 5.

A stanza possibly coined by Spenser, but certainly popularized by George Gordon (Byron) in his epic "Don Juan." The having to rhyme each word three times, followed by the couplet, is especially conducive to running a rhyme into the ground, and when coupled with Byron's propensity to double, triple, and bent rhyme (q.v.), the stanza is particularly good for making light of a heavy subject, or, as in "Don Juan," keeping light a poem that otherwise runs on interminably (12 Cantos of over 1000 lines each!).

LIMERICK

1. aabba, an 33223.

In its most common form, the last word of the first line is a person or place name. Possibly invented, but certainly popularised, by Edward Lear, his useage is usually doggerel when the form deserves (and lately gets) better than that. It is the closest thing English has to a spoken song, so that the syllable and stress count must be as exact as possible; quantity impedes both the anapest and the lyric, and should be avoided. The first foot of the line is often an iamb, and should always be if the preceding word has a feminine ending (unstressed syllable).

Six and the Single Girl

In a huff sat a great horny owl
Who harrumphed as he ruffled his jowl,
 "A bird who stands neuter
 Is not worth a hooter,
I swear by my mutter most fowl."

"Your sinuous snake in Your grass,"
Accused Eve, but the Snake called it sass:
 He denied, with a giggle,
 "No way, could I wiggle
Like that, when I haven't an ass!"

...

Said a scallop who thought it too cruel
That the grating of sand grow a jewel :
 "I'll keep it all out
 By withdrawing my snout,"
And the pressure reduced her to drool.

ODE

Odes, whatever their form, exhibit a /strophe/, stating an argument or observation, a matching /antistrophe/, stating its antithesis, and an /epode/ which is usually longer or shorter than the strophe, which resolves or chooses between the two.

It is not possible to imitate the /form/ of the Greek ode in English because of the marked difference between quantitative and stressed meter. However, the ode in English does imitate the intent and style of the Greek (and Latin) ode.

1. Pindaric

a. Spenserian.

1. strophe a5babc4cd5d4efefg5g6

antistrophe a5babc4cd5d4efefg5g6

epode a5b3c5ba3c5 de4ed fgfg5 hhijji4 k5k6

The strophe and antistrophe are metrical variants of the Shakespearean sonnet.

The form exhibits Spenser's habituation to the Alexandrine.

b. Gray. In Gray's /The Progress of Poesy/, Woods II:53 ff., there are examples of the Pindaric Ode. They are asserted "closely imitative" in structure and manner to the originals.

2. Modern

a. Keats. These assume the mood of the lyric ode without attempting the quantitative meter, periods, or stanzas of the Greek forms, and usually ignoring the strictly-tripartite exposition.

1. ababcdecde ... ia 5

a. These vary, 1,2,3,4,4,5,6,8 stanzas per ode.

It is perhaps noteworthy that the stanza is the same as the last ten lines of an Italian sonnet, at which Keats was also a marvel.

2. ababcdecdde ... ia 5 ("To Autumn," only)

/Asturias/

How comes this wonder with the icegriped night
From mummied thumbs in Andalusian bars,
Or urgency this adamant make light
The same sham theme at which our ice land spars?

When wailing water strides in shatter shod
And squalls itself to shards from shrilling threats
In petulance its anarch splinters spall,
What southron hails, or sunmulled cordial treats
That unalive, malevolent dark fraud
Whose lurch seems come to ram one cracking wall?

None who confound a friend may linger here
Where ice can creep the boottops to the will
That some succumb the midnight of their year
To weight our memory with winterkill:
What can that Andalusia know, this dread,
Whose chords must cozen and whose hands adore
Terpsychore, lean solarheated miss
Whose thunder in the heel, the bull, the blood
Turns, quivering to frost the one guitar
And it alone, has loved enough to kiss?

One man alone can midnight so engage
He cries the dawn, and only he let spit
At nights so cold their lotion sears his rage
Who knows the shot will snap before it hit;
And he alone imagines overmuch,
And he alone will whistle up a tune
That will outwalk the fellow firelight
And in the midnight of the desert touch
The core of chill in fire, that afternoon
Ring with what deserts also know of night.

OTTAVA RIMA

1. ababbcbc ... ia 5

Cats sleep to dream, for dreaming lets them chase
What's tasty or forever wants to play
Despite the blood from all the claws that grace
Exuberance and mar the cringing clay.
In dreams, the blood is red but does not sway
The playmate from his life, or life from laugh
(Ms. Macbeth could've dreamed the stain away):
And so the kitten dreams to save a gaffe.

PANTOUM

1. ABA'B', BCB'C', CDC'D', ... NAN'A'.

The form comes from the Malayan, where polyagglutination favors repetition in the ordinary speech, into the French, where only the French do.

The clanging repetition favors shorter lines and lighter feet.

POULTER'S MEASURE

1. aa ... ia 67

Properly, lines of 12 and 14 syllables.

Cf. "Poulter's dozen," maybe 12, maybe 14.

- b. See "Short Meter."

QUATORZAIN

1. Any 14-line lyric stanza.
2. See "Sonnet."

Actually any of a number of 14-line, often irregular, stanzas in iambic pentameter that developed into any of a number of English sonnets. Also the earliest name for a sonnet. Sidney, in */Astrophel and Stella/*, experiments with several, including those usually called "Spenserian" and "Shakespearian."

QUATRAIN

1. Loosely, any logical, grammatical, or sonic grouping of four lines rhyming abab or abba.

Allegretto

I should by trees' furs oozing into green
Learn blooming spring and so learn love,
But all my sauces shudder like the lean

And treading dove.

I should by lilacs ringing from the clay
Their royal robes prove summer loves,
But my brown brain will rabbit out of May
To strip the groves.

The acorn's autumn should have taught all things
Their travels as the red oak roves,
But all my raving chatter only sings
The squirrel too loves,

And only winter and the ringing wood
Within the tree and ticking stove
That hold but hints of generation could
Teach me to love.

2. But especially:

a. abba, ia (4),5; the closed or envelope quatrain.

b. abab, ia (4),5; the open quatrain.

Quatrains are used like completed bricks to build larger poems, but see especially the varieties of sonnet. The regularity of period afforded by the quatrain may be varied by making the grammar halt within the quatrain or run on into the next. See SONNET for examples of both.

3. The stanzas of the ballad are not usually referred to as quatrains because of the different meters in the lines, but see 1., above.

Word's Worth

There are no English words for woods
That plane to thick and even curls
Whose shape and color are the goods
Of pinafores and happy girls.

There are no English words for snow
Whose thirty flavors all instruct
The lecture of the Eskimo
To keep his children tightly tucked.

There are no English words for thought
That every student knew by heart

When Zeno and his cronies sought
To pick the lexicon apart,

And so no man can hope to fix
The English words for politics.

c. abab bcba cdc d ... , ia (4),5; linked quatrains
see Virelay.

In His Image

There is so little this computer does
But ones and zeros on a billion gates:
It is their pattern gives it its because,
And wherefore to the gear it animates.

The data dances in its ones and eights
To flip fleet input to eternal fact,
And tells the people that its action baits
That this was always how the cooky cracked:

A bit of color or a random act
Turns one to art, another to the dance,
Until men had what man himself had lacked
As sticks and stones were tinkered to advance.

The stones computers are weren't made by chance
As were ourselves in that grand grope of motes,
But grown in vats around the circumstance
Of dreams that sought to put themselves in quotes

And clone eternal life, that it connotes
Some permanance amid this madcap whirl,
But that is not the point: a program bloats
With unrestricted words just like a girl,

Exhibits growth, then parentage, then pearl,
Is rounded out with all that it accrues,
Acquires worth and value by referral,
And gets the game on empty CPUs.

RIME ROYAL

1. ababbcc, ia 5.

Incident In Da Nang

The day the four-year-old with the grenade
Blew herself upon my once-best friend
A place five kinds of racist all had made
Unfit for any conscript you could send
You wiped the counter right down to the end
Where I sat with a slowly-warming Miller,
Said, "What do you hear these days from the baby-killer?"

RONDEAU

1. aabba, aabR, aabbaR; ia 4.
2. abbaabR, abbaR; ia 4.
R is truncated, may be A/2, need not rhyme, and is often a pun.

RONDEAU REDOUBLE

1. ABA'B', babA, abaB, babA', abaB', babaR; ia 5(4).
R is truncated A, as above.

RONDEL

1. ABba, baAB, abbaA(B); ia 5(4).
2. ABab, abAB, abaA(B); ia 5(4).
3. ABab, abAB, abbaA(B); ia 5(4).

The Wild Goose Goes

The gray geese fly above the hunters' guns :
They've summer in their heads, though it is autumn.
When feet begin to chill on familiar runs,

The yellowed reeds crack
where mere growth has caught them,

And white bears embrace air, to gaze like nuns
Awaiting nones on knees, as though they sought them,
The gray geese fly above the hunters' guns :
They've summer in their heads, though it is autumn.

Though lemmings sleep the tundra's missing suns,
And gulls debate the dole the Humboldt brought them,
Some dare cold tears to watch these southbound duns,
The gray geese, fly above the hunters' guns.

Another form whose length and form are fixed
absolutely. The repeated lines may vary grammatically,
syntactically, or in reference.

ROUNDEL

1. AbaR, baba, abaR; ia (an) 5(4).
R is truncated A, and rhymes b.

SEIRENE

a /--/--
b /--/-
a 2(/--/--)
b /--/-

The bit is given in the "Song of the Seirenes,"
/The Odyssey/. However, it is the scansion of the
English as translated by Robert Fitzgerald, and is
admixed with quatrains (the lines abab).

SESTINA

1. abcdef faebdc cfdabe ecbfad deacfb
bdfeca ab,cd,ef; 39 lines, ia(5)(4).
Unrhymed (except accidentally), letters refer to
/whole words/ that end each line: exact word (including

grammatical pun), homonym, or composite homonym.

N.B.: Each stanza's set of terminals takes the previous set in the pattern faebdc (cf 2nd stanza). Last stanza is three lines; first of each pair may be first word of line, usually second accent of line, less often third.

Odysseus in Ithaca

More rare than fingers fashioned by the sword
Or callused by the cursing of their tools
Is love that chafes to bursting on its words
To supple at itself, its own salt jewel
Make fit like leather form it never felt
Though that smooth skin wear but the primal fault.

The having none with whom to share the fault
Has had more singers fall upon the sword
Than on the lyre to say what beauty felt
In breathing man; then do not fault the tools
For having made a sandbox of a jewel
When wandering wonders trickle out of words.

You do not know me. Twenty years of words
Callused to cursive pattern for the fault
Of wasting twenty years on that fouled jewel
And all my men who thought to take the sword
Was but to take up residence as tools
Have robbed my voice and rubbed my curls to felt,

And what Victory recall what the stone felt
Before it rubbed the alphabet and words
Of prig Pygmalion's cocky box of tools?
To make our dwelling on an ancient fault
Of being none until the careful sword
Found and defended here and there a jewel

Was in itself enough to wreak a jewel,
But fast forgot what its creation felt
As boys are left forgotten by the sword.
This is why we leave the sharpened words,
But is it theirs, the lawyers', or your fault
That you confound the product and the tools?

You knew the fitting out, unbeaten tools,
While these are tired of Greece, nor wear the jewel
By which we loved us, but these boys' same fault
Is dumb of how our Menelaus felt
When fit forgot him for some fitting words;
Nothing I bring, but the unbeaten sword.

The sword is the most general of tools
And not my words unfaced our wedding jewel,
But not since Aulis have I felt such fault.

In this example, six words were chosen in slant-rhymed pairs to fit an idea already in existence, put in their order on the page, and the rest of the poem composed in between them. Frost is vituperative of the method, however it is the /only/ way to write a sestina...

SHORT METER

1. xaxa ... ia 3343
"Poulter's Measure," printed in four lines.
 - b. See also "Ballad," which this often replaces.
 - c. See also "Common Meter."
2. aaxa ... ia 3343
3. aaba bbcb ... nnan, ia 3343, a linked version which may defeat the purpose of having an unrhymed line, but which certainly sounds off.

SONNET

Originally, any short English lyric; the listed forms were then called "Quatorzain."

1. Petrarchan or Italian
 - a. abbaabba,cdcdcd ia 5.

A lone mosquito, desperate for a drink
Got in my face, and so between my hands;

A marvelous small feat of wings and glands
Became a smear of stuff within a blink.
If gods there are, then even gods will wink
At that dear stroke whose meter but remands
The stuff of being to other allemandes:
You, only you, will ever raise a stink
For leaving but a beauty that can blind
But quickly slips the memories of men
As even taste is once more redesigned,
And you are taken up without your ken
Nor let alone consent, while all your mind
But dissipates to molecules again.

b. abbaabba,cdecde ia 5.

182

To any who'd appoint a child to place,
Your Furies mewl submission, will not cross
The pusillanimous who pule your loss,
And you stay hid among what you should grace.
The tape slips by the pickup heads; a trace
Repeats the tunes we threw against the joss
And overcalls the monument you moss,
For this had none beyond our ears' embrace.
But tape pops splash the same transmission hash
That stunted the old concert, and the frost,
Compounded of a common tracery,
Compiles from every minute worry trash
A glacial weight behind my pentecost
Where our new measures of that joy should be.

c. abbaabba,cdcdee ia 5.

232

Your heavens had had the earth, and turned it wrong :
The plum's long argument in sunlight found
Her explanation spiked on cooling ground;
The swallow fled your elm, whose limbs were strong
With stellar ice, for austral billabong;

The chipmunk chewed the seed, and left a mound
Of pinecone flakes, and your whole garden browned.
Then into that /pastiche/ I strode my song.

But you would have me more than god, a nerd
To keep the autumn at eternal bay
So that your love would never know a word
For dying, and your love, eternal May.
Now all you feared has come, a little sting,
And you do little but to curse the spring.

d. abbaabba,cddcee ia 5.

149

There is still wonder in an early chant;
And what though my guitar have lost a string
That make to play a strain? To this I cling
For every tatter in its mortal want
As far it wean me from the primer slant.
And what, years add such water to the thing
That no child practice at this parrying
For that it's insufficiently /avant/?

These shapes,
though all the arms of Thrace between us,
Or we've no arms, perhaps no will, to do,
Were still high model while the ages grew :
All arms their age denied, one plaster Venus
Beckons still to whom do not abhor
To wear arms that a man has worn before.

e. abbaabba, other variants in sestet.

202

I even see you in what you took out,
And in this space you leave to occupy,
There is but wood, and wax, and only I.
Damn your totalitarian rag. Now doubt
Attempts at midnight its ear-hissing rout,
And there's no bit of dirt for me to spy
As worse than me, beneath the whole damned sky --

Only my fear, as better than a pout.

Well -- Hades will have fun, and you with it :
How sweet it is, to be so scrubbed by you,
And think of all the wiping there's to do! :
Old Dante's brats, millenia of sin,
And all can make a sizzle of your spit
Before that generosity begin.

2. Spenserian

- a. ababbcbbccdcdee ia 5.
See "Ottava Rima."

328

The edges black before the spores are thrown,
These mushrooms stand in bridal white gone sour,
For they can go no farther than they've grown:
To stand and die is all their only flower.
To come to mind is not within their power;
If eaten, they would only make us sick;
They stand aloft for one day and one hour,
Then some few spores repeat the tired /schtick/,
And no mortician beetle gives a click
That even the spores but slosh beneath the cap,
And do not cast beyond the parent stick;
This is where life and death but overlap.
You have refused to be a bride of mind:
See here what happens to your churlish kind.

3. Shakespearean

- a. ababdcdefefgg ia 5.

Because I work at home, my family think
It is not work, for work is what you /go to/.
Try telling that to Mrs. Bobolink
And she'll for sure tell you where /you/ should go to.
Six to twelve hours a day I sit and sit
And stare my screen to try to necromance
The verb to verve, the syntax into wit:
I sit, and slowly overflow my pants.
I rise to smoke, again I sit to string

Three words together like an acolyte:
By sitting on that nest come anything
The bobolink has taught me how to write
By laying one small notion that might catch,
Then sitting long enough to make it hatch.

4. Gray's

a. ababababcdcdcd ia 5.

5. Fishhook

a. ababcbcdcdedee ia 5.

324

My loneliness must never haunt these lines
As it embodied me while you were here;
I have you now in thousands of designs.
Each knows you somewhat; all have held you dear:
This mushroom surely knows your brevity
For it was of the first to commandeer
Your little stuff, and so the last to see
Your recent entry into polyglot,
A hermit brought into community.
The little stuff I wit the mushroom wot
Is all its world, so little to appall;
It sees so little, but, then, you saw not:
Alone, I'm friended by a little gall:
You made me lonely when I knew you all.

b. ababababcdcdcd ee ia 5.

c. abcbcdcdedefaf ia 5.

d. abcbcdcdedeaea ia 5.

Cycla Sonnetta, q.v.

See also "Cycla Rima," "Terza Rima."

6. Irregular

1. Irregular line length

2. Irregular rhyme pattern

These are "Quatorzain."

SPENSERIAN

1. ababbcbc[c] ... ia 5[6]
An Alexandrine added to Ottava Rima, /q.v./
The Alexandrine closes each stanza from the next;
see esp. /The Faerie Queen/.
2. abababcc ... ia 5
But /cf/. esp. Byron's /Don Juan./

Though Byron did not invent this stanza, it is his /Don Juan/ we usually think of in connection with it. The rhymes are sufficiently varied to admit of a long poem, and there are enough of them to allow superciliousness. It should be noted that the rhymes are often sprung, a comedy that gives the back of the hand to what has just been punctuated by the rhyme.

Burning the Norton at Both Ends

Why do men with no noise left to eschew
But taking a machine gun to the shoats,
And wanting vehicle for billets-doux,
At last write letters to the deader poets?
Perhaps it beats Four Seasons on kazoo,
And though it may not beat Pinot, it's
Time-consuming, inexpensive, fun,
A wondrous exercise, and overdone,

Though reigning critics never called such games
Since Babel gave a point of view to Genesis
And Einstein did the same for other frames;
Something there is that doesn't love the pen as is
And men since Adam go on naming names,
So now there is this epilogue of Dennis'
That will not keep your children warm in classes
Unless your School Board burns it in their faces.

And it would lilt like Dvorfk, much possessed
By his New World and ours, and all its promise,
But then I start to sing, and I am pressed
For that I follow Anselm, Paul, or Thomas,
And what infinity is perfectly regressed

By which syllables in between what commas
By those who, having ears, have never heard,
No matter who first spoke their favorite word.

...

TERZA RIMA

1. aba, bcb, cdc, ded, ... nan. ia(5).
/Cf/. "Cycla Rima" and "Virelay."

Once More, With Feeling

The eyes full-size already, that began
In this subvermin, pseudoalien face:
They look back at the human like the man.

They see but light and shade in any case
And track black spots the same as track their dad,
But trump their troubles with a mother's ace.

They make their errors not because they're bad
Yet suffer of the ignorance they're in.
And still they know they grow to Galahad

With diligent attention. Once again
They set out on their course without a mind
They've travelled it before, a harlequin

Who stumbles through a role he's not defined
With what aplomb they muster from the plan
They gathered once before -- and left behind.

TRENTA-SEI

1. aBAB'CC' Bxbxyy Axaxyy B'xbxyy Cxcxyy C'xcxyy
An invention of John Ciardi on the Provencal
structures. In these, x rhymes with x and y with y
within the stanza, but not with any other stanza.
Introduced in "A Trenta-sei of the Pleasure We Take in
the Early Death of Keats," /Echoes,/ Fayetteville: The

University of Arkansas Press, 1989.

2. ABA'B'CC' Bxbxyy Cxcxyy
A'xaxy B'xbxyy C'xcxaA (-Aa)
3. aBAB'CC' Bxbxyy Cxcxyy Axaxy B'xbxyy C'xcxaa (-yy)

TRIOLET

1. ABaAabAB; ia (an) 4(3).
2. ABab abAB; ia 4.
3. ABabAbaBA; ia (an) 4(3).
4. ABababaBA; ia (an) 4(3).
b is often feminine.

Phoebus Appalled

No sorer insult has the song
Than singing what occur will not
Deter the verse that prods the prong
That concertises polyglot,
But being what the baying long
Is discipline the simple spot
To like a lad of lesser wrong
Than singing what a cur will not :
No sorer insult has the song.

VILANELLE

1. AbA' abA abA' abA abA' abAA'

The four requirements for a vilanelle's refrains:

1. It is a thesis, cothesis, or antithesis statement;
2. It is a first change;
3. It is a second change;
4. It is a conclusion, as half of a couplet.

A good half-couplet had, the difficulty of continuing a vilanelle, whether that first line is A or A', lies in coming up with the /other/ refrain. Thank the Muses that the /other/ refrain must necessarily make a couplet with the first line had, in the conclusion, and that is usually how I cobble my second refrains: first, the made

line must satisfy the mechanics of a good couplet with the had line, /at the same time/ setting off or augmenting the latter as thesis line; second, it should be capable of changes.

Very few statements satisfy these requirements, let alone make good poetry into the bargain.

/Logos/

A word is just a little way
Into wisdom, not enough
To taste. A time I put away
The parables that I could stay
Still shows the centuries how tough
A word is : just a little way
Past other noises of the day
Returns a beating breath, a puff
To taste, a time I put away
As it went out, and you to play.
Another penny on my cuff :
A word is just. A little way
Beyond what people want to pray
Is what was said : sufficient stuff
To taste a timetime. I put away
The children's words in coming gray
However, for the book to rough
A word is just a little way
To taste a time I put away.

Note the variations in grammar of the repeated lines. The technique is not mandatory, but does provide variety in what can easily stale. Several superior vilanelles, however, do not make use of variance, but rather of refrain.

2. AbA' abA abA' abA babAA'

VIRELAY

1. abab, bcbc, cdcd, ... nana; ia 5353, 4242, etc.

The Way We Were

You into my life strode stark and sleek
And jumped my timid bones:
You were so much of girl but never meek
You struck me into tones.

Ours were not the days of tea and scones
But full of flesh and flesh;
I swam about in my testosterones
And grew a man afresh.

The news was full of crime and Bangladesh
But our bright days were not;
We put our thoughts to ways that we could mesh,
Enjoy what we had got.

Biscuits in the can, beans in the pot
Were all our worries then
You seemed quite bent on keeping me besot,
And I, to push the pen.

The squirrels hailed our presence with a Sten
When we took beds of grass;
The lake baptized our antics with amen
Whatever came to pass.

Now we are old, and antics seem a sass,
Youth nothing but a cheek
That we once had against the common mass
For one whole week.

This may give you an idea of how form can order
thought, give it progression, and keep it from running
off at the mouth. It began in a single line a couple
weeks old, and continued in the fact that I needed a
virelay for this book.

For far too many decades, Wordsworth is "quoted" in Literature and Creative Writing "courses" as "excuse" for the fact that the undisciplined poetaster slobbers all over the page, or cries to the skies, or screeches, and indeed does anything but produce a lyric. The offending passage is this:

"Poetry is the spontaneous overflowing of powerful emotion."

What he said (in the Preface to Lyrical Ballads, coauthored with Coleridge) is quite its opposite:

"Poetry is the spontaneous overflowing of powerful emotions, reflected in tranquillity. And no one can be said to have had a powerful emotion, save that he had also thought long and deeply."

/Verb. sap./

AFTERWORD

Young poets seem to be, instead of "passionately in love with language," rather passionately in love with their /statement/. I wonder if there is any way to convince them that the High Trvth they have just discovered, and are so eager to broadcast that they forget the /manner/, are High Trvths precisely because they have been discovered and broadcast millions of times before their own happy accidents. There being no novelty in the thought, there had better be novelty in the statement. Prosody is the bag of tools, the only available bag, by which to achieve that novelty -- or even only a cleaning up or dusting off of what has gone before.

It should never be forgotten that the forms of stanzas and the relating of sounds arise initially out of necessity or experiment. Those that work, we keep by using again, whether it is the same poet or another that uses them. These are very far from all possible stanzas, though these are probably all the sound relationships

readily available to English. The stanzas are merely most of those that poets in one language or another have found useful, in some cases so useful they have stolen them from other languages, and made them their own.

If these do not work for you, it is possible you need to cobble up a new form. It is more probable that you need more work, for learning these is sweat of the worst kind; on occasion it has made me long for the Army again as being easier, and certainly more immediately rewarding. If you persist, however, you will know why I did, the first time one of your poems sings back at you. And be of good cheer: practice does bring the kind of facility that can peel off line after line with little grunting and few rewrites. About four years should allow facility with some dozen of these.

Oh? And how old will you be in four years if you /don't/ practice?

Yours truly,
dmh