PIED POETRY

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To lure thy half-wit
(Having all, it moves nor'-nor'-nor' line)
Thy piety tears a writ --
A wash-out --
Writes moving word CANCEL on
The back of it,
And shall
Finger all!

"Modern poetry is most confusing," said Alice hesitantly. "How can piety tear a writ? And why should a half-wit be lured by the moving word cancel? It seems like a very ordinary word to me!" Poor Alice! Even professors of English and literary critics would have difficulty explaining this fragment. As one strains to catch some slight semblance of meaning behind the words, one is overcome by the same disoriented feeling that one has when looking out the window of a gently banking airplane -- what has happened to the horizon? Is there no longer a fixed point of reference, a unifying theme?

And yet ... and yet ... there is something oddly familiar about these words. Look -- it contains the words moving, finger and writes, which surely sounds familiar. And, yes -- there is piety nor wit, and tears wash out a word. It's nothing but a scrambled version of Edward Fitzgerald's famous quatrain from Omar Khayyam:

The Moving Finger writes; and, having writ,
Moves on; nor all thy Piety nor Wit
Shall lure it back to cancel half a Line,
Nor all thy Tears wash out a Word of it.

But why? Why go to great lengths to translate hauntingly beautiful poetry into gibberish? Diffidently, we suggest one possible answer. Why should it not be possible to measure a poet's ability to select words germane to his message? The more skilfully he has selected his vocabulary to convey a given thought, the more difficult it should be to use these same words to convey any other idea. Of course, it is hard to put a precise measure on the value of the scrambled poem as compared with the original.

One may perhaps object to this method of critical analysis on the grounds that the poet himself more or less is the final judge of the value of his poetry. But it at least to make the following experiment, as the following examples will show:

Shall I
I shall
I have

Is there an
(And Eliot) which

Nor do
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garble:

Although more
the original
money -- in
explain why
gerald or Eliot.

A second
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grounds that it favors the poets of the eighteenth century over those
of the twentieth; Gray's Elegy in a Country Churchyard expresses it-
self more clearly than Eliot's The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,
at least to the lay reader. Yet, Eliot comes through with flying colors,
as the following fragment and its scramble suggest:

Upon the flannel beach I heard
A singing part to "Hair".
My mermaid's trousers have behind
The white each peach shall wear.
Each shall I walk to eat, and I...
I shall dare!

Shall I part my hair behind? Shall I dare to eat a peach?
I shall wear white flannel trousers, and walk upon the beach.
I have heard the mermaids singing, each to each.

Is there any doubt in the reader's mind (even if he is unfamiliar with
Eliot) which is the original?

Nor do earlier poets always have a clear advantage. Consider the
following excerpt from The Habit of Perfection, written in the last half
of the last century by Gerard Manley Hopkins, and compare it with its
garble:

Elected Silence, sing to me
And beat upon my whorled ear,
Pipe me to pastures still and be
The music that I care to hear.

Although most readers will correctly identify the second version as
the original, we think that the scramble gives it a good run for the
money -- in this case, sense instead of dollars. Perhaps this helps
explain why Hopkins is a much less well-known poet than either Fitz-
gerald or Eliot.

A second, more mundane, use for scrambled poetry is to test the
reader's poetic knowledge. In fact, it was for this reason that the pied
poems in this article were first constructed. Last year, Margaret Far-
rar approached the senior author to do a puzzle feature for the new
magazine, World. The scrambled poetry idea was proposed to the edi-
tors of that magazine, but after mulling it over for several months they
turned it down, probably because it was too esoteric for the readership.
We present a number of examples of scrambled poetry originally prepared for the puzzle columns of the World, and invite the readers of Word Ways to identify the originals. To solve them, the best bet is to look for some verbal oddity, some word so unusual that it occurs only in the poem to be identified. If you give up, see Answers and Solutions at the end of this issue.

1. Tall and shaking, I kick a star,
   And a lonely steer
   Sails by to the dawn...
   The seas, and a ship face down,
   The seas a-breaking! And I must ask again,
   And go to her on wheels, and the song
   To the sea! White and grey
   Winds the mist, and grey is all the sky.

2. The female peasant shouts
   (Often a side!) to the male
   When she meets the monster:
   "Bear! Himalayan Bear!"
   Accosted thus, he will turn deadly,
   Pride the he in his species and
   The nail who rends is,
   But for the scare,
   More than the tooth of the peasant.

3. Quiet!
   It's a bower and a breathing loveliness
   And beauty of sleep.
   Is it quiet?
   For a thing ever increases,
   And sweet dreams of nothingness
   Will never keep us still,
   But will for health
   Pass into a full joy.

4. The nearer musician --
   My Music Master -- gone
   To the sweetest little sweet of all, brother,
   All of us singers dead to the singing!
   O is he, the Master,
   Moved from Chibiabos forever,
   He all of a --
   He has, has he!

5. Let the fit, fit time
   Achieve my sublime
   Crime,
   In the crime
   All the punishment.
   (I shall object to the punishment!)