

ANOTHER VOCABULARYCLEPT POEM

J. A. LINDON

Weybridge, Surrey, England

Editor's Note: In a Vocabularyclept poem, the constructor (in this case, J. A. Lindon) is supplied with an alphabetically-arranged list of words from a poem by the originator (in this case, Howard Bergerson); his task is to reassemble these words into a more-or-less meaningful poem. Earlier examples of these reconstructions by Lindon, Bergerson and the editor appear in the May 1969 and August 1970 issues of *Word Ways*. Unfortunately, the two poems given below are not quite identical; Bergerson erroneously supplied 'lightening' for 'lightning' in the word-list.

I don't think I would have tried this second Vocabularyclept poem -- they take so long to do -- if I had not noticed that the first stanza was obviously the single-stanza poem in Bergerson's early collection, "The Spirit of Adolescence". This, of course, made things easier, and less time was required. In completing the poem I have tried to rhyme and scan as well as make reasonable sense, not an easy task. I could see hazily that certain words, such as 'higher' and 'power', might be scanned either as monosyllables or disyllables, according to context; also that some short words, in particular 'the', could here and there be slipped in without destroying the scansion. It makes, for instance, little difference whether a poet writes 'to greater love I now resort' or 'to the greater love I now resort'; both scan pretty well. What I completely forgot was that it mattered very much whether the poet had used single or double rhymes at the ends of his lines, since a pair of double rhymes meant two syllables unavailable elsewhere. So, I ought to have counted syllables as a preliminary, and then tried to plan my rhymes in advance. This I didn't do, and at the end found myself with one syllable too many. I also had one pair of lines that wouldn't rhyme, since one, on account of its extreme shortness, had to end with a certain polysyllabic word to which there were no monosyllables available for rhyming purposes. This represents a weak point in my reconstruction, but not too bad a one. The sense is, however, rather dubious!

Stanza Common to Both Poems

- 1 What compensation can there be for this,
That youth is shorter still, and life is short,
And Man, the product and the Nemesis
Of an impersonal force he could not thwart,
Must suffer for the ignorance of stone,
The elements that brought him forth amiss?

What law exacts for him a last resort,
 What recompense was made for him alone,
 What compensation can there be for this?

Bergerson's Original

- 2 O lips that once so thrilled me when you smiled,
 You yearn to kiss mine now, as not before.
 O eyes by which my boyhood was beguiled,
 You look in mine at last, but to adore.
 And though I am exiled from your embrace,
 I worship the new passion in your face --
 Yea, though from your embrace I am exiled
 And banished from your kiss forevermore.
- 3 When eyes have met in love, and feelings borrow
 Too steeply on the starkly rising day,
 When waves of bliss in thirsty sands of sorrow
 Have sunk, and surge no more, then we shall pay
 Who know not the awakening must come,
 The hearts be murdered and the mouths made dumb,
 And the eyes decipher in the dank tomorrow
 The envelope addressed to yesterday.
- 4 What metaphysics could predict all Heavens?
 What magic night foretold that mystic hour
 When rapture filled your soul with hidden power?
 And, should the sunset of your life burn red
 To find your eyes bleak, uninspired and dead,
 What fire must atomize that blackened hour,
 What lightning wand transmute its ugly hue,
 What dissonance-resolving higher power
 Must separate your suffering from you?

Lindon's Reconstruction

- 2 And what am I in life, who have no bliss,
 My soul sunk in your eyes that so beguiled,
 Banished from murdered you I yearn to kiss,
 Dumb to your look and from your love exiled?
 What mystic wand, what magic could then be
 In you to transmute all bleak separate sorrow?
 What rapture, too, what hidden power in me,
 With passion rising, to embrace Tomorrow!
- 3 Yea, though you starkly smiled, though now by you
 The dank and thirsty sands must atomize,
 The waves surge higher, and at last the hue
 By which mine eyes, when mine, once met your eyes
 Must borrow steeply from its boyhood, thrilled,
 Made more -- decipher the when that we should burn,
 And know that yesterday the night was filled,

The blackened uninspired, but lightening.

- 4 O Metaphysics, come, predict the hour
 When exiled hearts find new awakening day,
 When mouths of suffering kiss lips of power --
 The hour of feelings must not, shall not pay!
 In your eyes am I ugly -- and adore?
 Your envelope addressed and your dead face
 Have foretold the red sunset as before,
 And dissonance-resolving your embrace!
 O worship heavens on fire forevermore!

LANGUAGE REFORM

Present-day pop grammarians such as Edwin Newman, William Safire and Richard Mitchell lead one to believe that the English language is in a process of irreversible decay; in a generation or two, we will all be using phrases like "Me-Tarzan-you-Jane". Dennis E. Baron's fascinating new book, Grammar and Good Taste (Yale University Press, 1982; \$19.95 in hardcover) is a welcome antidote to their doom and gloom; he shows that the state of our language has been viewed with alarm for more than two hundred years. Of course, fashions change: reformers have at different times sought to defend the language against foreign neologisms, or to restore it to its Saxon purity; others have attempted to introduce simplifications in spelling, or consistency between spelling and pronunciation; still others have tried to preserve useful distinctions in meaning of near-synonyms, or flogged syntactical horses like shall-will. Language is a human invention, responding to the linguistic needs of many different individuals. This being so, it would be most surprising if it evolved in any consistent or logical fashion; certainly there is no linguistic law that guarantees a simple and logical grammar. It is this essential disorderliness that drives would-be reformers wild, perennially dooming their efforts to failure. We may not recognize (or approve of) the form that English will take a thousand years from now, but we can be reasonably certain that it will serve its users well.