

ON CONSTRUCTING CONSTRAINED POETRY

HOWARD W. BERGERSON
Sweet Home, Oregon

The late mathematician Eric Temple Bell wrote science fiction stories for pulp magazines back in the 1920s and 1930s under the pen name John Taine, an activity which was said to be an embarrassment to his colleagues. I read many science fiction stories back in that time, including some by John Taine about whom I then knew nothing. One of his stories, which appeared about 1936, was called *The Ultimate Catalyst*. It was about a girl whose father had been doing research in some remote tropical community where he discovered the ultimate catalyst. He had it safely in a chemically inert bottle, but he dropped it and it broke. To stop the catastrophic spread of unlimited, enormously accelerated chemical reactions of all kinds from that spot, the daughter with the help of a male companion set fire to the village and the surrounding jungle, and fled with him down the river on a raft. The last words of the story were "Only once did she look back. The flames that she herself had kindled flapped against the black sky." This image burnt itself into my psyche, for the moment I read it I conceived it as serving in the role of a powerful and haunting metaphor. However, it was not until 1941, when I was stationed at Camp Roberts, California, that I wrote "Out in the Torrid Moonlight":

Out in the torrid moonlight of the tropics
 She waked in me the first love I had known.
 She talked with me on happy, happy topics.
 I learned that with her I was not alone.
 And when she left, she left the burning cities
 Of my soul.
 And the jungle night-birds sang their poignant ditties
 To think, 'With you her secret thoughts condole.'
 Away, away, she fled along the river,
 Guiding her hurrying raft with pole in hand.
 She dared not quite begrudge a tear to quiver
 Along her cheek, by tropic weather tanned.
 Beneath her now the conflagration dwindled,
 She did not turn to look, she feared to sigh,
 She knew the flames that she herself had kindled
 Flapped against the black sky.

There was a reason why I wrote the poem precisely when I did. The day before, I had sprung a simple word riddle on my friend Rex Rogers: what is a four-syllable word meaning fire? I had in mind oxidation, but Rex guessed conflagration, which had never occurred to me. This brought the word dramatically to my attention

as the very element I needed, and the next morning I wrote the poem. I showed it to Rex, without mentioning either his or John Taine's role in its genesis. Rex felt that the only thing wrong with the poem was that it should be set in a cold and wintry environment to provide a contrast to the inferno of the emotions. I silently disagreed in the case of this particular poem, for here I wanted the tropics to connote romance as well as symbolize the heat of the passions. But I very much liked Rex's idea, and I used his suggestion in later poems such as "Winter Retrospect" (see *Word Ways*, May 1969).

When I showed "Out in the Torrid Moonlight" to the British comic poet, J.A. Lindon (see *Word Ways*, May 1980), his criticism was that the eleventh line "is awkward and unnatural; and the last line, which should always be faultless, is poor - with its bad scansion and unpleasant (to me) short-A sound in flapped and in black. I'd have been tempted to end with something more like 'encarnadined the sky'."

I totally disagreed with J.A. Lindon's criticism. In particular, the departure of the last line from the regular pentameter beat is for me one of the best things about it. But I liked his alternative suggestion, and I have used it in the variant below. Each of the four four-line sections is a pangram, and the entire poem contains five complete alphabets:

Out in the torrid moonlight of the tropics
 She waked in me the first love I had known.
 She quibbled not o'er joy's exalted topics
 Of cozy sex, for we were all alone.
 But then she left the vanquished, burning cities
 Of my soul;
 And the zany jynxes squeaked their poignant ditties
 To think: 'With you her secret thoughts condole.'

Away she fled down the fluxing zigzag river
 On her logjam-jostled raft with pole in hand.
 She dared not quite begrudge a tear to quiver
 Along her cheek, by tropic weather tanned.
 Behind her, joy-and-pain's inferno dwindled,
 She turned not, vexed, to gaze - she feared to sigh,
 She knew the flames her own mystique had kindled
 Incarnadined the sky.

It seems that - although flowers become jonquils and birds, jynxes - almost any quatrain can be pangrammed:

Twinkle, twinkle, cold bright star.
 Explain to me, please, what you are,
 Far above my world so high,
 A jewel I quiz, up in the sky.

Or, in precisely the same metric, William Blake's celebrated poem, "The Tiger":

Tiger, tiger, bright as quartz,
 Thy jungle keep no mortal thwarts.

What gaze could vex, what hand could vie
To frame thy fearful symmetry?

In what voids, pristine and dire,
Quenchless burnt thine eyes, their fire?
What wings could dare those jinxed black holes?
What mighty hand could seize the coals?

What thews of Avatar, what art,
Could squeeze thy thorax, twist thy heart?
When first made quick, it jumped to beat,
What awful hand forged thy dread feet?

What hammer? What the links - what chain?
What furnace held, unquelled, thy brain?
What anvil juxtaposed? What grasp
Dared its blazing terrors clasp?

When galaxies cast down their spears
And barques sailed heaven's zone of tears,
Was he joy-filled his work to see?
Did he who made the lamb make thee?

Tiger, tiger, bright as quartz,
In jungle's night where Pan cavorts,
Dare Puck exult to mock thine eye,
Nor dread thy fearful symmetry?

Another subject for pangramming, quatrain by quatrain, that attracted me briefly is Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard". I considered the notion of doing the first stanza, about ten of the more excellent of the thirty-odd stanzas, and closing with another version of the first stanza, making twelve in all - but I didn't get far. I only pangrammed the first, second and fourteenth:

The curfew's knell extols the day's divorce,
The quickened zebra herds charge o'er the lea,
The ploughman, vext, rides home his weary horse
And leaves the unjust world to you and me.

Now fades the scene jejunely from the sight
And zones of quietude exalt the wold,
Except where beetles drone in quivering flight
And sleepy tinklings lull the distant fold.

Full many a diamond in the rough is groomed
To wed the deep sea's graves in bleak despair:
Full many a jaundiced jonquil must, foredoomed,
Extinguish her pizzazz in empty air.

The curfew's knell extols day's dying fount;
Like quick gazelles light flees night's blunderbuss.
The vext knight gallops hard his jousting mount
For miles, and leaves the unjust world to us.

At first, what drew me away from this was a germinating interest in the logological Tiger. Consider how difficult it would be to auto-

mynorcagram it. Because the word "what" is as important in "The Tiger" as the word "nevermore" is in "The Raven", one would have to find a way of getting some W's in early! I tried something a little easier - quatrains, each of which was an automynorcagram on its first line:

Tiger, ireful, glowing elate,
 Rubied in reddest ember's fire,
 Up leaps gore's lance of war innate!
 No god e'er let a tiger expire.

Tiger, icy, glowing elate,
 Roving in clover-leaves, you glower.
 Lord of what immortal night
 Gave earth larks also to embower?

Tiger, icy, glittery eyed,
 Roving in Cathay, you glide.
 Laved in terrors - teeth etched red,
 You eat your earthlings, deified.

But now I feel an increasing interest in the idea of anagramming whole stanzas into other already-known whole stanzas. For example, let us say that the third stanza of "The Tiger" is the base, and the first stanza is the target into which one must try to convert it:

And what shoulder, and what art,
 Could twist the sinews of thy heart?
 When thy heart began to beat,
 What dread hand forged thy dread feet?

Tiger, tiger, blent of bad,
 Who shattered the forest of the sad,
 What hand, what thews, can hew or taunt?
 Why dare thy dread and deadly haunt?

Or if one can find two poems which are quite different in substance but alike in number and length of stanzas, then one may try to anagram each poem into the other, with results which I strongly feel must be very intriguing. To test this, I turned to two six-line poems I wrote in my youth:

The stream is a linguist of myriad languages.
 It understands the dialect of birds,
 The jargon of the crickets and the frogs,
 And the almost unintelligibleness
 Of gabbling coyote packs that come to drink
 At night among the shocked and blushing roses.

Once did the galleon moon one night capsize
 In a cloudy tornado, and sink slowly down
 Into our night-green back-yard meadow here.
 We boarded it, and under the glowing sails
 We spent till dawn just sailing among the mountains
 With lavender fans for oars when winds were still.

The anagram of the second poem is:

The stream now dead - a myriad-language linguist,
 Spoke unnumbered dialects in the wild:
 Jargon to the mud-hen, frog and cricket;
 Inanities to loons, nonsense to coyotes.
 A-well with wordsong wizardry, Norn pools warbled anon
 When nightingales vain had fled the wasted willow inn.

Conversely, the anagram of the first poem is:

One night the galleon moon, listing in cloudy gusts,
 Sank in black tornado scuds to nestle afar.
 The kingdom's sibyl and her king boarded it.
 She hushed the ebb-tide mists.
 The pair just sailed among the craggiest terracotta cliffs.
 Men that scoff ran agog.

The letter distributions of individual lines of poems will, in general, come so near to being totally different that it might be scarcely possible to anagram "Thou still unravished bride of quietness" and "Fat black bucks in the wine barrel room" into each other. But, at the other extreme, the letter distributions of full-length poems will often be almost exactly alike, so that to anagram one into the other could very well prove to be an almost trivial matter. The stanza lies somewhere between.

-OLOGIES AND -ISMS

The above title of this \$90 Gale Research Company reference work is somewhat misleading, for it is far more than a listing of words having these two suffixes. It is more accurately described as a thematic dictionary in the spirit of Roget's original thesaurus: a lexicon of words grouped under 430 thematic categories (Abortion, Acrobatics, Age, Agreement, ..., Writing, Zinc, Zoology) consisting of "attitudes, practices, states of mind, and branches of science." -Ologies and -isms are, of course, widely scattered among the categories, but other endings are more concentrated: -phobia, -mania, -mancy (under Divination), -cide (under Killing), etc.

A thematic dictionary enables the searcher to locate words he cannot remember by simply referring to the field in which they occur. However, as Roget and others have found, it is difficult to classify the luxuriant tangle of knowledge in a logical way; some topics fall in conceptual cracks. One must use the cross-references among the thematic categories to be sure of finding all relevant words. For example, although logology does appear (under Puzzling), its raw materials are scattered about: I found anagram and conundrum under Games, lipogram under Writing, homonym and heteronym under Language, and no entry at all for palindrome. A browser's delight, the book contains words like tyrosemiophily (the collecting of Camembert cheese labels), lysophobia (the fear of hydrophobia), and ferroequinology (enthusiasm about railroads). The third edition (1986) is edited by Laurence Urdang.