

# POEGEMATRY

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Poetry & Gematria remain at an uneasy distance, not quite speaking, not quite ignoring each other. One flourishes in exile, slipshod & ever prouder [a coinage from Ken Saro-Wiwa's novel *Sozaboy*, published in 1988 by Longmann]; the other dwells among qabbalistic catacombs & cranks. In the words of a Hellenistic poet once they met. Leonides of Alexandria, who gave up astrology to be a poet (surely a first!), composed epigrams that managed to sneak at last into the Greek Anthology [see p 503 of D.L. Page's *Further Greek Epigrams*]. Every one of them was written so that the sum of the letters of one elegiac distich matched the next's. This was called isopsephia, & the precedent of Homer invoked.

I have dabbled at emulating his performance, & found that with English gematria (spelled Gmatria in this article, to distinguish it from attempts to apply the non-placevalue systems of Greek & Hebrew to our alphabet) a sum of 365 is feasible for a rough pentameter line:

I know the extremes of the human mind:  
I have read Nietzsche and Wittgenstein,  
I rode the streets of Dallas all the time.

This, surely the most Procrustean of all verseforms (it takes me hours to compose), might warm the cockles of one who finds even *dróttkvætt* [a complex verseform employed by the Scaldic poets of early Scandinavia] too breezy.

For awhile five-letter word squares summing to 365 detained me:

B R A S S	T R Y S T
R U N N Y	R U A C H
A N V I L	Y A H O O
S N I R P	S C O T T
S Y L P H	T H O T H

In "Laryngitis of the Troubadour" I embedded a prime number square in a poem, using word equivalents:

the CUBE of GNEISS looks BAD:	31	73	7
can HE ANELE CABALATRAB	13	37	61
whose WORK was A BOOK?	67	1	43

Omar Khayyam's modification of the Arabic calendar is called a *Zij*, which to me looks like nothing more than a list. I have appropriated the



word to mean a specialized list, in particular a list of words having the same letter sum. I have weaved these new threads of arbitrary association into scientific-esoteric poems (which I call fashboaghogzhye). Each is governed by a hidden integer, & I stuffed as many such words as possible into them. With experience, I began to associate these words in my mind as a single Gestalt. For instance, I made a Double Sestina on 111 (amethyst, Noumenon, Ginnungagap, icosahedron, strength, jalapeño, bulb) & a Quartina (a kind of homologous sub-sestina) on 72 (stuff, Phyva, dream, reason). These numbers, enhanced by my poetic explications, began to have their own flavor, even when accidentally encountered in the course of a day, so that I envisioned the possibility (in some subculture devoted to Gmatria poem-making) of poems comprised of nothing but sequences of numbers...

After that, I conceived the possibility of joining Gmatria-equivalent pairs into couplets which I call rhime (analogous to rhyme). I either choose the endwords in advance (elective pairmaking) or sum the last word in one line & look up in my Zij what words are available for the end of the next (adscititious). Refinements suggested themselves: alternate odd & even summed pairs, as French alternates masculine & feminine rhymes in classical usage; do not repeat a sum from the same "decade" in adjacent pairs.

I began to consider the relation between rhiming words, & to classify these relations. I at last found a model in the Japanese art of renga: linked-collaborative verse where each unit, alternating 5-7-5 & 7-7 syllables, is composed by a different "player" than the one before. Each unit has to subtly correspond to the previous unit according to the player's choice from among some dozen or more classes of permissible linkages--much like moves in chess.

Most rhimes seem to have little or no intrinsic connection; these disjunct pairs resemble the renga category of contrariness (hikichigae). Some differ strikingly in length: as=facade, kiwi=Abacadabra. Some pairs come from different root languages: neon=foehn, book=Ghayb, jyotishi=koksagyz. Some show simple alliteration: jalapeño=javelina, god=game, zax=zarf. Some are similar in sound: commodity=communion, iron=cairn, jasmine=azure. Some are similar in meaning: monad=alone, chamber=tomb, way=sign, umgang=limit, stone=calcspar. One of the rarest is a perfect rhyme: gneiss=sacrifice. Many can be formed using a proper name as one element: you=Altair, language=R'lyeh, sapphire=Chartres. I particularly prize pairs that simultaneously qualify for more than one category.

Then there are pairs whose connection can't quite be pinned down: star=indigo, cede=nab (almost antonyms), dinosaur=anachronism, head=mad (quasi-synonyms), glossolalia=invocation, petals=stone. This is a variety of reflexive pairing (much commoner in renga) that psychological tests make much of, but somehow seem to fit: logic=jive, catafalque=sonnet, fire=gold, spirit=darkness, word=diamond, iron=will, mind=lair, art=amber, war=rain, music=rebus, rainbow=sciachy, gravity=slavery, place=being,



Sputnik=ziggurat, Stonehenge=calligraphy. Already we begin to make a poem when thinking about such pairs & why they belong together.

"Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard are sweeter..." The alchemist Michael Maier wrote music that both conforms to Baroque motet conventions perfectly, & also encrypts secrets of his Art in the symbolism of its notes. So with the play of these rhyme-tones, that weave in the mind a music beyond the music.

#### ANAGRAM CONTEST

Dan Tilque sent a contest from the June 17 1997 Portland Oregonian that challenged readers to do a mini-review of a "hot summer flick" using the letters in the movie's name. (Word Ways readers will recall a similar contest by Games Magazine, summarized in the Nov 1994 through May 1995 Word Ways issues.) The following week generated numerous responses, including

THE LOST WORLD: JURASSIC PARK cursed raptors' hot jaws kill;  
raptors! real shock! just wild!

SPEED 2: CRUISE CONTROL so, C "2"? nope--it's reel crud; "2"  
succeed--not! R.I.P, loser!

AUSTIN POWERS, INTERNATIONAL MAN OF MYSTERY tale raps of  
insane, smutty moronity--a winner!; Wayne as Mr. Informant in  
a polyester suit--not!

ULEE'S GOLD go see? dull

THE LOST WORLD the worst, doll!

ADDICTED TO LOVE odd cattle video

GROSSE POINT BLANK pistol...sneer...bang! ok?

BATMAN AND ROBIN not bad, brain-man!

ROMY AND MICHELE'S HIGH SCHOOL REUNION inane, shy, comic  
loser-girl duo (men? ohhh!)

AUSTIN POWERS saw it (super? no!); spare us! no wit