

TWO WORD-UNIT RETEP SONNETS

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The sonnet is said to be the best known and most widely practiced of all fixed forms of poetry. It consists of fourteen lines in iambic pentameter, with variable rhyme schemes which, in English, usually follow one of two patterns. One, the Italian or Petrarchan sonnet, usually consists of an eight-line octave followed by a six-line sestet, with a rhyme scheme that is usually ABBA, ABB-A, CDE, CDE. The other, the English or Shakespearean sonnet, consists of three quatrains followed by a couplet, and its rhyme scheme is ABAB, CDCD, EFEF, GG. A sonnet's components may be combined into a single stanza or written separately, as the poet prefers.

Rhymed, end-to-end-palindromic verse of four or more lines, called "RETEP verse" for short, was first explored by J. A. Lindon and Howard Bergerson half a century ago, after which era interest in it languished for several decades before somewhat reviving in recent years. Experience suggests that there are, for practical purposes, eight major forms of RETEP verse: the letter-unit and word-unit expressions of AABB- and ABAB-rhymed RETEP quatrains and their multiples, and the letter- and word-unit expressions of RETEP limericks and RETEP sonnets of any pattern. Examples of seven of these "Big Eight" RETEP verse forms have previously been published (all of them first in *Word Ways*), the exception being the **word-unit RETEP sonnet**. To remedy that lone deficiency, and to help celebrate *Word Ways*' 200th issue, this article presents herewith two such sonnets—the first, to my knowledge, ever published.

The first two lines of Shakespeare's sonnets no. 18 and no. 30, respectively, served as the starting points for the following two poems:

Sonnet to a Stored Summer Dinghy

Shall I compare summery days to thee?
Gal, thou art more lovely and more pleasing;
Sweet if alarming, thou top'st tarts and tea!
("Alarming" art thou *not*—I am *teasing*!)

Neat too are skiffs, whilst *thou* art alluring!
Charming art *thou*; catboats are...too smiling!
Beguiling art thou, storage enduring;
Enduring storage, thou art *beguiling*!

Smiling too are catboats; *thou* art charming!
Alluring art *thou*, whilst skiffs are...*too* neat.
Teasing am I not, thou *art* alarming—
Tea and tarts *top'st* thou! (Alarming, if sweet!)

Pleasing more—and lovely more—*art* thou, gal;
Thee, to days summery, compare I *shall*!

It All Comes Back at Night

Lend now late nights to sad and rueful thought:
Friend, summon now remembrance of things past—
And then must thou sigh! Things many were sought;
Hollow, all—gauds vain! Then, first were things last...

Demand didst thou fame? Honors were yielded.
Follow did base days—friends were forgotten,
Rotten were morals, evils were shielded...
(Shielded *were* evils—morals were *rotten*!)

Forgotten *were* friends; days base *did* follow.
Yielded were honors (fame *thou* didst demand);
Last things *were* first then—*vain* gauds, all hollow!
Sought were *many* things... Sigh thou must, then, and

Past things of remembrance now summon, friend;
Thought rueful and sad to nights late now lend!

As mentioned, the prescribed meter for sonnets is iambic pentameter, meaning that the cadence of each line should be ta-DAH, ta-DAH, ta-DAH, ta-DAH, ta-DAH; in the preceding poems, accordingly, each line contains exactly ten syllables. Stresses, however, could not be similarly controlled, in part because the reversal of word order in the second half of a word-unit RETEP poem means that the pattern of stresses in its first half will be mostly reversed in its second half.

Apparently, word-unit palindromes are intrinsically less interesting to most people than are letter-unit palindromes, to judge by the numbers of each kind published. This is a pity, given that one really need have no experience at all with letter-unit palindromes in order to be able to compose a good word-unit palindrome. Even such a seemingly complex construction as a word-unit RETEP *sonnet* is accessible to the patient novice, inasmuch as such poems are built up just one pair of reversal lines at a time, and if one can fashion *one* complementary pair of word-unit reversal lines of ten syllables each, one can certainly fashion six more and have a sonnet's worth. Other verse forms are also available, of course; here, for example, is a new version of a simple AABB-rhymed word-unit RETEP poem of five quatrains first published in *Word Ways* in 2010:

The Equinoxes

“Spring to dial the wind to Fall!”
Sing blithe sprites; now winds chill call,
Rustling woodlands in brave breezes—
Hustling, creatures soon flee freezes.

Shedding now snow, not rain, comes cloud;
Spreading, bleak frosts of ice now crowd
Streams, as Sol, face hoar and cold,
Seems lower—soon, pale Winter's tolled.

Around turns Earth, chilled and sleeping,
Bound somehow, entropy keeping...

Till, keeping entropy somehow bound,
Sleeping and chilled, Earth turns around!

Tolled Winter's pale soon lower seems.
Cold and hoar face Sol, as streams
Crowd now ice of frosts' bleak spreading;
Cloud comes, rain—not snow!—now shedding.

Freezes flee; soon creatures, hustling,
Breezes brave in woodlands, rustling.
“Call chill winds!” now sprites blithe sing,
“Fall to! Wind the dial to Spring!”

The Big Picture: J. A. Lindon's Axiological Question

What, when all is said and done, is the point, literary or otherwise, of a word-unit palindromic sonnet—or, for that matter, of any other kind of palindromic poetry? J. A. Lindon, who may fairly be said to be the father of complex rhymed palindromic verse, including RETEP verse, asks a similar question in his article “A Wry Look at Palindromic Verse” in the November 1972 *Word Ways* (5:220). He writes,

What value has the idea of formal reversal in poetry? My immediate inclination is to say ‘precious little’, with the accent on the ‘little’ rather than the ‘precious’; and I suspect, too, that this may well prove my final estimate. . . . Slip in, among some more normal poems you are reading aloud, one that is palindromic, and your hearer will probably notice only the absurdities, the contortions, the infelicities of the writing; and if you point out irritably “But it is a palindromic poem!” will be apt to reply “Then it would be better if it weren’t!”

Is this condemnation all? Has PD verse nothing to recommend it? I suggest tentatively that it has two things, at least, in its favor. Firstly, *repetition of sound* (rhyme, assonance, alliteration, refrain, etc.) is of the very essence of poetry, and such sound repetition is automatically introduced by reversal technique. . . . Secondly, by steering the writer away from everyday ideas into quite uncharted regions, reversal technique forces him to create something new, or at least try to do so, out of the odd materials and unlikely juxtapositions it turns up for him. PDs discover the inherent surrealism of retrograde spelling, and present it in agreeably alliterative form.

Cogent as they might be, these observations seem to me to constitute at best a partial answer to the fundamental question that Lindon poses when he asks, “Has PD verse nothing to recommend it?” If, as Lindon says, palindromic form adds little or nothing to a poem, and in fact is very likely to *detract* from its literary quality, what is it, then, that motivates people to compose palindromic poetry in the first place? Why, for that matter, was Lindon himself such a copious producer of palindromic verse? Surely not because he hoped to profit from an enhanced alliterativeness in his verse, or because he could think of no simpler way to infuse an element of surrealism into his poetry. The fact is that palindromic poetry is practically guaranteed to be poetically inferior to non-palindromic poetry, and everyone knows this. So why is it that people nonetheless still take the trouble to compose palindromic poems?

This is not really a very perplexing question. The obvious explanation is that ‘normal’ and palindromic poetry are composed for entirely different reasons. ‘Normal’ poetry is written to appeal to readers’ emotions, or to their esthetic sense, or for didactic or polemical purposes—in short, to *communicate* something; palindromic poetry, on the other hand, is composed mainly to exercise the intellectual faculties of its composers—their analytical and synthesizing powers. Palindromists attempt to mold a palindrome to the complex contours of some rhymed poetical form chiefly for the sake of the mental challenge the problem presents and the satisfaction to be found in solving it, and not primarily, as with other poetry, to share with others the poet’s ideas or impressions. If, in the process, the palindromist creates a verse that is beautiful, or trenchant, or humorous, or poignant, it is much more the palindromist’s *craft* that is on exhibit than his or her poetical conceptions. As in all palindromic writing, in palindromic poetry it is the *palindromic character* of the writing that is crucial to whatever interest may inhere in it.