RHYMING, END-TO-END-PALINDROMIC VERSE

JIM PUDER
Saratoga, California

Rhyming, end-to-end-palindromic (RETEP) verse is a relatively recent development in palindromic composition. As its name indicates, RETEP verse is to be distinguished from other varieties of rhyming palindromic verse in which whatever palindromicity exists is not of the end-to-end kind. RETEP verse is arguably the most sophisticated and ambitious form of palindromic writing ever attempted, and it is certainly one of the more challenging ones to try to compose.

The first two published specimens of letter-unit RETEP verse of which I can find any record appeared in the February 1969 issue of Word Ways, which was the first issue to be edited by Howard Bergerson. In an introductory essay, Bergerson presented a number of original palindromic and charade-based verses, one of which was a RETEP quatrain. In the same issue, an article featuring the palindromic poetry of J. A. Lindon included one RETEP poem, also of four lines. Thus it happens that Bergerson and Lindon, mutual wordplay muses who competed in testing the boundaries of the possible in palindromic composition, very fittingly share the distinction of being the first known publishers of letter-unit RETEP verse.

No study of RETEP verse could be complete without citing the two aforementioned archetypes of the form. Though its lyrics might seem more evocative of a rousing drinking song, Bergerson ascribed his quatrain to the fantasque oriental dancing song “Fling Thong” in the once-performed opera O Tongue in Cheek:

Rail at natal bosh, aloof gibbons!
Snob-bird named “Red Rose of Mine Desire!”
Rise, denim foes! Order—demand ribbons,
Snob—big fool! Ah, so blatant a liar!

Unlike most RETEP verse, which rhymes in conventional ABAB fashion, Lindon’s poem, entitled “Draw, O Howard,” rhymes in an AABB pattern. The composer could easily have rearranged the lines of his poem to rhyme in the usual way (see “Palindromy’s Unseen ‘Virtual Verse’” in the August 2005 Word Ways), but chose not to do so in order to try to maximize the clarity of its dialogue. In the poem, which imagines a conversation between two hostile swordsmen, one antagonist speaks the first two lines and the other the second two:

Draw, O hot moody sword girder-on!
Draw, or foot it! O negate wit! On!
Not I—wet age—not I! Too froward!
No red-rig drowsy doom to Howard!

In the 41 years since the publication of these first letter-unit RETEP verses, surprisingly few additions to the genre—including the six in this article, I know of fewer than two dozen—have appeared. Following its two-part presentation of a varied selection of RETEP verses, this article will attempt to survey this slight corpus, as well as those of the other two kinds of RETEP verse.
A. Four Varieties of RETEP Verse

Nearly all non-palindromic rhyming verse employs meter, which properly used greatly enhances the impact of rhyme. Alas, consistent meter is a perpetual challenge to letter-unit RETEP verse, which normally subordinates it to the more imperative constraints of palindromicity, grammar, rhyme and sensibility. As a result, whatever meter there is to be found in conventional letter-unit RETEP verse is generally due as much to happy accident as to anything else. Several years ago, however, it occurred to me that it might be possible to forcibly incorporate consistent meter into RETEP verse by constructing such verse upon a rigid template in which only a word with a particular accent pattern could be used in a particular place in a stanza. The somewhat Frankensteinian upshot of this speculation was ‘‘Demi Ran, Nan,’’ Anna Rimed, a prolix, inane, impeccably metrical RETEP poem which overran some five pages of the Nov. 2004 Word Ways. The following compressed excerpt from ‘‘Demi’s’’ center conveys a fair idea of her whole:

“Denni’s Not Lit, Del!” Deene Erred

“O, Neronian nail! O, gnomon! / Denni, Deng is raw!” Nap maced;
“On I rot, Mede—it’s an omen!” / “Deron, gig Em!” sot Tom laced.
“Otter Olwen, Kyle’s a ‘blender’— / Deron’s ‘arid,’” Nan refined;
“Otter Bill lams!—Sam, snap slender / Dex!” Elf-hater Del, too, tined:
“Revie-ceder Ned enabled / Dex!” (Evander Evee paged:
“I’m, alas, sere—help me, Tyson!” / Dex in setose sopor pled;
“I’m a naff, fur-faced bison— / ‘Depilate’ me, taliped!”
“No, sib! Decaf, ruffian ami, / Del proposes!” Otes nixed.
(“Nosy Temple, here’s salami— / ‘Degauss’ Allen,” Kay admixed.)
“Del, base Mac is—Reg, naiver!” / Dega-peever Edna vexed;
Red, Nels pans Ma’s small libretto: / “Deni, Fern and Ira ‘snored’?
Nemo ‘nastied,’ Em, Torino??…” / “Decamp, Anwar!” Signe dinned;
“No, Mongolian Nai—no Reno!” / Derree needled, “Tilton sinned…”

As may be seen, this compositional technique, although well-suited to managing meter, is not especially conducive to achieving extended continuity of thought. Freer and less-constrained conventional RETEP verse construction methods, by contrast, often permit a single line of thought to be held to and developed over some considerable palindromic space. In the newly composed conventionally-constructed RETEP poem below, notice that and various other stylistic differences between the two kinds of palindrome:

Insecure Mountaineer Bends the Ear of His Stoical Sherpa Guide

Here’s Olaf: “O Tibetan! I’m ‘effete,’ yes—
‘Set,’ sir, ‘to tenor poem or flowery lay’!
Ay, a ‘lyre-wolf Romeo, prone to tristesse,
Yet effeminate’!...Bit of a loser, eh?”
Word-unit RETEP poems may look as if they ought to be easy enough to compose, but in practice the attempt to do so may call to mind the familiar analogy of trying to herd cats. Nevertheless, after many "here, kitties," here is...

Turnaround

“Spring to dial the wind to Fall!”
Sing to seeming sprites Time’s call
Rustling woodlands in brave breezes;
Hustling, creatures soon flee freezes.

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

Around turns Earth, chilled and sleeping,
Bound somehow, eternity keeping,
Till,
Keeping eternity somehow bound,
Sleeping and chilled, Earth turns around!

Tolled Winter’s pale soon lower seems;
Cold and hoar face Sol, as streams
Shroud now ice of frosts’ crisp spreading;
Cloud comes, rain not snow now shedding.

Freezes flee; soon creatures, hustling,
Breezes brave in woodlands, rustling.
Call Time’s sprites, seeming to sing,
“Fall to! Wind the dial to Spring!”

(The theme of “Turnaround” was suggested to me by poet Mark Scrivener’s near-palindromic poem “Dusk to Dawn,” which is currently posted online at several sites.)

Concluding the first part of this motley medley of RETEP verses is this freshly-minted palindromical limerick of the letter-unit variety:

Don’t Mess with Dad

“Data nil, Lis, is—still, age is sad!”
Derogating, nuts “did” Dia’s dad.
“...Sides reversed is,” Dad said—
Did stung Nita go red!—
“‘Dassie gall—it’s, sis, ill in a tad!’”
The quest for the perfect letter-unit “palimerick” continues, and this one probably comes the closest to perfection yet. Thematically unified (Nita and her pals Dia and Lis attempt to tease Dia’s dad about his age, only to have the wearisome old logophart literally turn their own words around on them), it also scans reasonably well. Limericks consist of five lines of 3, 3, 2, 2, and 3 feet respectively, the first foot of each line being an iamb and the rest all anapests; however, an extra unaccented syllable may be added to the 1, 2, 5 group of lines or to the 3, 4 group or to both, and “Don’t Mess with Dad” conforms to the latter configuration—each line all anapests—exactly. “Dad’s” greatest weakness may reside in its phrase “dassie gall,” which asks the reader to accept the premise that South African hyraxes—dassies—are notorious for their insolence, which might in fact not actually be the case. Substituting “mom,” “mum,” “pap” or “pop” for “dad” in the limerick, if such could be done, would mandate the complete revision of its first and fifth lines, which if nothing else would obviate the dassie question.

**B. RETEP Conversions**

Much easier than composing a RETEP poem from scratch is simply altering some suitable non-RETEP palindromic verse to conform to RETEP specifications. Given the relative paucity of extant RETEP verse, it seems wasteful to ignore this potential source of additions to the genre, and by far the richest lode of raw material for RETEP conversions that I can think of is the unmatched body of palindromic verse composed by Howard Bergerson. In particular, the following remarkable verse from his “Fling Thong” collection has long struck me as being worthy of particular attention:

To id: If I, an emoter, cannot fight or fall,  
Or, frustrated, I bay and do sit—’tis odd.  
Nay! Abide, tart surf! Roll a froth gift on nacre to me—  
Naïf idiot.

This is possibly, I think, the most elegant end-to-end-palindromic verse ever composed; at any rate, it stands out among its fellows, and thus becomes a conspicuous candidate for RETEP conversion. It proving impossible to retain the original’s elegance in an altered form, a humorous theme was attempted. Imagine the following scenario: a surfer, having lifted a few too many at a beach party, makes some intemperate remarks about a friend. This friend, overhearing, confronts him thusly:

Do say, Lev! I, an “emoter,” “cannot fight or flee”?  
Rot! “Refrustrated,” I “bay and do sit”? ’Tis odd!  
Nay, abide, tart surfer, to reel—froth gift!—on nacre to me,  
“Naively a sod”!

Among Bergerson’s other “Fling Thong” verses there are about a dozen ABAB-rhyming quatrains which are not end-to-end palindromical, but separately palindromical in their first two lines and second two lines. It would be possible to convert a number of these quatrains to RETEP verse by rearranging the order of their lines, provided that some of their language were altered to preserve sensibility. As an experiment, I tried doing this with the one reprinted at the bottom of page 10 in Bergerson’s widely available book *Palindromes and Anagrams* (Dover, 1973) that begins “Malcontent eye, vile by a grot…” For the following RETEP conversion of this verse,
envision a coffin-bound vampire sending a telepathic message to a young colleague who is both frustrated by the slow progress of her romance with a shy and inexperienced suitor and concerned that her cover story of being an avid spelunker—to account for her spending all of the daylight hours ensconced in a cave—is coming under increasing suspicion:

Maiden, if no craft so melts a chaste bat-lover—
Eva, cruor-evocator gay, be live! (Yet net no “clam”!)
Malcontent eye, vile by a grot, a “cover”?
Our cave revolt abets!...Ah, castle most far, confined I am!

Poe, eat your heart out...A final RETEP conversion of a Bergerson quatrain is offered here mainly in order to place before a new generation of *Word Ways* readers his lovely and uncannily verisimilar original verse, which was not among those collected in *Palindromes and Anagrams*:

Begonia petals wed fog.
Nap on, red rose so placid.
I revere veridical poses.
Order no pang of dew’s late pain, O Geb!

(Geb, in Egyptian religion, was god of the earth and the father of Osiris and Isis.) The best conversion of this verse that I could manage was one that at least preserved intact the third line, with its typically Bergersonian word “veridical.” Keeping that line, however, meant that the second line must continue to end in “placid,” which in turn meant that the fourth line must end in some word that rhymes with “placid,” of which not that many palindromizable examples exist; all of which is mentioned by way of explanation as to how my (mostly) lyrical lyric comes to end the way it does:

Dicacity laid roses
In a nose so placid;
I revere veridical poses
On anises. Or, dialytic acid.

Shades of the libretto of *O Tongue in Cheek*!

Lastly, consider the familiar palindromic poem “August” by Emerson Drupe, the erstwhile self-proclaimed “Poet of the Poconos.” Readers may recall that when Drupe, who at the time was an outspoken antipalindromist, was informed that “August” (which he had just published as a filler item in a local weekly) was itself a palindrome, his initial reaction had been one of disbelief, shock and horror; but that later, after the *Readers’ Digest* had paid him $300 for the poem, it was noticed that he had changed his letterheads to read “The Palindromist of the Poconos.” For any readers who may somehow not have encountered this chestnut before, here is “August”:

On Matsu, Guam, lacier islets—
Apropos a harem muse—
Rests a vast, sere summer.
Ah, a sopor pastels ire...I, “calm August,” *am*, no?
Although undoubtedly a ripe prospect for parody, “August” proved not to be an especially good candidate for RETEP conversion. The best I could manage was this somewhat cryptic derivation that retains only fragments of the original verse’s language:

“Drab, a sopor pastels Isis’s pilots,”
Pillager Damon spits, “So retard
Rat Eros’s ‘tips’—no mad, regal, ‘lips-to-lips,’ sis, islets,
‘Apropos a bard’!”

Notwithstanding its relative mediocrity, this effort does at least demonstrate that almost any sufficiently long palindrome can serve as the starting point for some sort of RETEP verse.

C. RETEP Verse in Retrospect

Among the reasons for this attempt to compile a comprehensive list of published RETEP verses are the facts that I think they are inherently interesting, and thus worthy of being remembered, that there are as yet few enough of them that the task is still a manageable one, and that many of them are likely to be forgotten in time if not memorialized in some such listing as this one. As regards completeness, I should caution that my knowledge of the printed literature of palindromes, let alone that which has been published only in electronic form, is less than exhaustive, and it is certainly not impossible that I have failed to find one or more published examples of RETEP verse. For any such inadvertent omissions from this survey, my apologies.

Included in this census are any rhymed, end-to-end-palindromic verses I could find that are possessed of at least four lines and at least two different rhymes in a regular or standard rhyme pattern. Excluded are minor variations such as might result from small changes in wording, etc., or from a rearrangement of line order.

Letter-Unit RETEP Verse (Listed in chronological order of publication)


Comment: The first, and still among the better letter-unit RETEP verses ever published. Both were later collected (pp. 6 & 116) in Bergerson’s Palindromes and Anagrams.


Comment: These are the first letter-unit RETEP verses of more than four lines (i.e., of more than two rhymes) ever published. “Esne’s Nonsense” is a 12-line poem rhymed in ABAB pattern; if it consists, as Lindon remarks, of “agreeably sounding nonsense,” it does at least scan remarkably well. “Dames Pale Lapse Mad,” even more astonishingly, is a 14-line Shakespearian sonnet; of its seven rhymes, all are perfect. If my information is correct, incidentally, the composer of these two long and complicated RETEP poems was 81 years of age in 1972.
Lindon in Bergerson’s *Palindromes and Anagrams*: three short-lined 4-line poems, “Aid for a Scandinavian Alcoholic,” “Verse During Pre-Op Delirium,” and “Picnic” (pp. 116-17).

Paul Remley in *Word Ways*, Vol. 7, No. 2 (May, 1974), in his article “Surrealistic Art Objects”: this 4-line poem, entitled “Origin of a Teetotaler” (p. 72):

Sit in a bar, even. On, on, I vow!
One mo’? He mix a twelfth gin fizz?
If night flew, taxi me home now.
O vino, no! Never! A ban it is!

Comment: For a RETEP poem, this one does an excellent job of cleaving to a single story line: a bar patron, his speech slurred by drink, is startled to realize how much he’s consumed and takes a taxi home; later, he passionately swears off the juice forever. No doubt the composer was aware that he could improve the language of the second line with the change of a single letter (“One more—mix a twelfth gin fizz!”), but that would have meant having to replace “home” with “Rome” in the third line, which would have ruined the poem’s overall sensibility.

Lindon, posthumously in *The Palindromist* No. 4 (1997), this 4-line poem entitled “Booze, Boats, Beauty, a Bard and a Bonesetter”:

Delia’s night. A poet so drab.
A barge Maltese. No boot, ailed
Delia, too bone-set, lame—grab
Bard, osteopath, gin...Sailed!

Comment: While it is not one of Lindon’s better RETEP verses, this one nevertheless does, as *The Palindromist’s* editor remarked with some asperity, at least rhyme and keep to a theme. He had a point. Improbable as it may seem, this was apparently the first new letter-unit RETEP verse to be published anywhere in 23 years.


Comment: Of all the varieties of RETEP verse, limericks are one genre that really ought to scan well; alas, all six of these early attempts to compose a decent “palimerick” obstinately refused to do so, the problem usually being an irreducible overabundance of syllables in one or more lines.

Bill A. O’Connor in *Word Ways*, Vol. 34, No. 2 (May, 2001), in his article “Palindromic Decalogues,” this untitled quatrain (p. 154):

Trade moody arts at catnap, Mary,
Riah made no gorgon start—
“Rats, no grog on Edam hairy!”
Rampant act astray doomed art.
Comment: It is only necessary to read this verse to “hear” its outstanding feature, namely, its emphatic trochaic rhythm. Note the alternating double and single rhymes. Some earlier letter-unit RETEP verses were fairly metrical, but none so pronouncedly so as this one.

17 Puder in *Word Ways*, Vol. 37, No. 4 (Nov. 2004), in the article “‘Demi Ran, Nan,’ Anna Rimed”: a 92-quatrains poem of the same title (p. 245).

Comment: “Demi” rhymes in an ABAB pattern, the “A” lines all ending in double rhymes and the “B” lines in single rhymes, no rhyming words or word combinations being used more than once in the poem. Assembled on a repeating pattern, its 92 quatrains all have exactly 30 syllables in alternating 8- and 7-syllable lines, all of which exhibit a consistent trochaic tetrameter. Overall unity of theme and extended continuity of thought, however, are both conspicuously lacking in this sesquipedalian farrago.

“Demi” was written primarily to demonstrate the feasibility of incorporating a consistent meter in long RETEP verse. Its seemingly pointless lengthiness was intended, in part, as a refutation by counterexample of the persistent naive notion that longer palindromes must in some respect be inherently superior to shorter ones. In addition, bettering the factitious record for the world’s longest RETEP verse, long claimed for an imaginary 1400-syllable poem attributed to George Marvill’s fictive Levin Snivel, was admittedly also a consideration, and in fact “Demi’s” 2767 syllables in its debut nearly doubled Snivel’s purported total. The piece has since been revised and shortened.


Comment: “Walton Reflects” was composed specifically to demonstrate the practicability of contriving variations in some specimens of end-to-end-palindromic verse by means of rearranging the order of their lines. It is presented in a dozen different line-order versions, all of which rhyme and all of which (with the help of punctuational changes) make at least some sense, but only eight of which are end-to-end palindromes.


Comment: Shown in four permutations, this may be the first letter-unit palindromical limerick to scan reasonably well, its syllable count being an acceptable 8-8-6-6-9. Unity of theme, alas, is poor.

20–25 Puder, and Bergerson/Puder, in *Word Ways*, Vol. 43, No. 1 (Feb. 2010), in “Rhyming, End-to-End-Palindromic Verse,” six items: By Puder, the 4-line poem “Insecure Mountaineer,” the letter-unit palindromical limerick “Don’t Mess with Dad,” and an untitled RETEP riff on Emerson Drupe’s “August” (4 lines). By Bergerson, as modified by Puder, three 4-line verses converted to RETEP verse, all untitled.

**Word-Unit RETEP Verse** (Note: Most published word-unit RETEP verse is flawed by imperfections of sensibility, grammar, rhyme or palindromicity, or by some combination of these. Standards of acceptability in this category being unclear, I have thought it best simply to note here anything I found that seemed to have been intended as word-unit RETEP verse, regardless of my opinion of its success. Listed by author.)
Anonymous. In his notes to C. C. Bombaugh’s *Oddities and Curiosities* (Dover, 1961), Martin Gardner cites (p. 344) two early verses, one a 4-liner from a Cornish grave offering four cheery arrangements of the words *shall / we / all / die*, and the other an untitled 8-line meditation by an unknown author upon nightfall and owlets. The latter poem may well be the first literary word-unit RETEP poem ever published; in a slightly different form, it appears in a 1907 puzzle and wordplay collection authored by A. Cyril Pearson.


Morice, Dave, two items: [a] “Books,” a 12-line poem first published (ca. 2006) as a bookmark (see below), and [b], in “Kickshaws” in the Feb. 2007 *Word Ways*, an untitled word-unit palindromical limerick (p. 55), the first of its kind.

Puder, J., three items: [a] In the article “Return of the Palimerick” in the May 2007 *Word Ways*, two variations of an untitled word-unit palindromical limerick (p. 164), with several other simple variations indicated; [b] in “Limerickshaws” (by Dave Morice) in the Aug. 2007 *Word Ways*, an untitled word-unit palindromical limerick extolling limericks (p. 212); and [c] in the article “Rhyming, End-to-End-Palindromic Verse” in the Feb. 2010 *Word Ways*, the 21-line poem “Turnaround.”

Scrivener, Mark, his 2006-copyrighted 16-line poem “Dusk to Dawn.” Easily located online.


**Line-Unit RETEP Verse** Although one would suppose that line-unit RETEP verse would be much the easiest of the three kinds of RETEP poetry to compose, I know of only one published example worth mentioning, and that is J. A. Lindon’s celebrated 8-liner “As I Was Passing...,” which may be found on p. 118 of Bergerson’s *Palindromes and Anagrams*. (Lindon’s other famous line-unit palindromical poem, “Doppelgänger,” doesn’t rhyme.)

To close with a coda, here is a word-unit RETEP poem which was crafted by Dave Morice (with its six stanzas forming a single column) as a design for a bookmark. Notice that each couplet is thrice-rhymed:

**BOOKS**

Books read you. You sight birds.
Cooks feed you. You write words.
Pages make you. You take a ges.
Ages take you. You make pa ges.
Words write you. You feed cooks.
Birds sight you. You read books.