

INTRODUCTION
TO
THE COLLECTED
SHORTER VERSE
by
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Introduction



The verse collected in these volumes derives from two sources: the Sonnets, Mostly Bristolian [hereafter SMB] and the Odes, Epigrams & Further Sonnets [OEFS]. The SMB is a 155 sonnet collection conceived in 2016 as a project to write one more sonnet than Shakespeare's 154. Since its completion, the OEFS has been gradually accumulating with no particular completion envisaged. For convenience, SMB poems are given Arabic numerals and OEFS poems are given Roman numerals.

With a few exceptions¹ my verse is almost entirely formal, rhyming and iambic pentameter, in the latter's dominant forms of sonnet and heroic couplet; I have not as yet tried my hand at the rhyme royal form ABABBCC introduced by Chaucer in the late 14th century.

To a large extent, my literary traditionalism aligns with my cultural conservatism. I vehemently believe that the dazzling heritage bequeathed to Western civilisation by classical antiquity and its

¹ Parts of my alter ego T.O.Ilet's Waste Land pastiche The Wastemen - which features as an Appendix in my forthcoming novel Woking Pox - are in free verse. And my unfinished satires The Modern Lady's Dressing Room and The Modern Hudibras are in iambic tetrameter couplets - see below for further discussion of both poems.

successors is worth rescuing from the stultifying and deracinating woke barbarism of the contemporary arts-industrial complex. At the Southern English boarding schools which I attended half a century ago, we studied a wealth of Latin, English and French literary text. In the case of Latin, I found myself translating historians like Pliny, Sallust and Livy, Virgil's foundational epic the Aeneid as well as his Eclogues and Bucolics, Horace's Odes and Ovid's Metamorphoses, the atomist philosophy of Lucretius in *De Rerum Natura*, and the Satires of Juvenal. In French, I read Moliere, Racine, Corneille, Rimbaud, Constant, Baudelaire, Sartre and Camus, and have continued as an adult to read the 19th/20th century fictional canon - Flaubert, Balzac, Zola, Proust, Stendhal, Gide, Mauriac, Houellebecq etc. Reading English at UCL in the early 1980's, alongside our core studies of Chaucer and Shakespeare, we studied Elizabethan and Jacobean tragedians, Restoration comedians, Augustan satirists - among whom Pope has been an enduring influence on my verse - Victorian novelists and the 20th century classics. My hope as a writer is that I can play at least a minor role in reinvigorating literary fiction, classical drama, formal verse and the appreciation thereof against the depredations of postmodernism, critical race theory, and other contemporary cultural cancers.

The remainder of this introduction focuses on iambic pentameter and its dominant expressions the sonnet and the heroic couplet. The discussion will be facilitated by definitional clarification of the terminology involved. Accordingly, we begin with the notion of the poetic foot which goes towards the constitution of a line of verse. A foot of verse consists of a number of syllables, typically either two or three and also differentiated from one another in terms of stress location, the six most common forms in English verse being:-

- Trochee - two syllables, first syllable stressed.
- Iamb - two syllables, second syllable stressed.
- Spondee - two syllables, both syllables stressed.
- Pyrrhic - two syllables, neither syllable stressed.
- Dactyl - three syllables, first syllable stressed.
- Anapest - three syllables, third syllable stressed.

A line of verse can be of any given length. Much of the Latin verse which I studied at school in the 1970's was in dactylic pentameter and hexameter (i.e. 5ft and 6ft respectively), albeit generously leavened with spondaic substitutions. French formal verse is often in iambic hexameter a.k.a. "Alexandrine", whereas English formal verse has for whatever reason been dominated by the iamb, for the most part in pentameter, although trimeter abounds and there was an efflorescence of iambic tetrameter rhyming couplets between the late 17th century² and the early 18th century,³ a form taken up to comic effect in the 20th century by Roald Dahl,⁴ and which I have tried with moderate success to imitate in my own ongoing "sub-heroic" couplet satires *The Modern Hudibras* and *The Modern Lady's Dressing Room*, the latter a Swift-inspired reimagining of the Depp-Heard marital debacle.

Our next terminological facilitations are definitions of the sonnet and the heroic couplet: a sonnet is a poem consisting in fourteen lines of iambic pentameter,⁵ and a heroic couplet is a rhyming pair of iambic pentameter. For an example of the former, see any of the sonnets between the covers of the present volume. For an example of the latter, consider the following two lines selected at random from my heroic couplet satire *The Wokeiad*:-

The porters pick up all the hardcore porn
Composting on the College Master's lawn.⁶

The heroic couplet was pioneered in longform verse by Chaucer.⁷ Among Shakespeare's contemporaries, special mention deserves to be

² See Andrew Marvell's *To His Coy Lady*, Samuel Butler's *Hudibras*.

³ See in particular Jonathan Swift's exuberantly revolting *The Lady's Dressing Room*.

⁴ See Dahl's *The Pig*, *The Crocodile*.

⁵ Allowing for by no means infrequent trochaic substitutions, although per Andrew Benson Brown [q.v. <http://bit.ly/4nsAaDV>] to include more than one occurrence per line is to flirt with bad form.

⁶ Bk1. lines 393-34. <https://www.freespeechbacklash.com/article/wokeiad>

⁷ q.v. *The Legend of Good Women*, the *Knight's Tale*.

made of Thomas Nashe for his superbly scatological mock epic *The Choise of Valentines*, and of John Donne for his multiply enjambed and conceit-laden metaphysical verse, in particular the 1st and 2nd Anniversaries. Notwithstanding, the heroic couplet is generally acknowledged as having reached its apogee with the Augustan poets of the late 17th and 18th centuries - Dryden, Johnson, Richard Owen Cambridge and especially Alexander Pope, upon whose *Dunciad* both of my heroic couplet satires *The Montpelriad* and the *Wokeiad* are modelled. With the dawning of the machine age around the turn of the 20th century, the heroic couplet went the way of all formalisms and - while this may be due to my own ignorance as much as anything - I know of only three significant modern exponents of the form besides myself, these being the South African poet Roy Campbell,⁸ and the novelists Vladimir Nabokov⁹ and Anthony Burgess.¹⁰

In contrast to the sad decline of the heroic couplet as an art form, the sonnet never really died out, and has in recent years enjoyed something of a resurgence, with a wealth of excellent examples published in outlets such as *The Hypertexts* and the *Society of Classical Poets*. The sonnet is as before a poem consisting of fourteen lines of iambic pentameter.¹¹ A sonnet can have any given rhyme scheme - or none at all, in which case it is a blank verse sonnet. That said, the three most common rhyme schemes are the Petrarchan - taking its name from the 14th century Tuskan inventor of the sonnet as art form - the Shakespearean and, somewhat the rarer of the three, the Spenserian.¹²

⁸ Campbell's *Georgiad* is a satire of the Bloomsbury Set, provoked by his disgust at the revelation of his wife's lesbian affair with Vita Sackville-West

⁹ The first and larger part of Nabokov's novel *Pale Fire* is a 999 line heroic couplet poem.

¹⁰ See in particular Burgess's *Essay on Censorship*, a defence of Salman Rushdie against the fatwa issued against him by Iranian Shiite clerics, which draws comparison with Pope's *Essay on Man*.

¹¹ Leavened as mentioned by the occasional trochaic substitution.

¹² Adverting to a rhyme scheme touched upon earlier, it strikes me that an interesting experiment might be to compose a sonnet consisting in two rhyme royals, thus: ABABBCCDEDEEFF. I found the following example in a defunct

Before embarking on a discussion of these and other forms, I want to introduce some more terminology, in part of my own devising. These are the notions of the Petrarchan and Shakespearean quatrains, the Petrarchan sestet, and the Spenserian transition.

- The quatrain and sestet are understood for present purposes as respectively a four line and six line verse in iambic pentameter.
- A Shakespearean quatrain has an ABAB rhyme scheme.
- A Petrarchan quatrain has an ABBA rhyme scheme.
- A Petrarchan sestet has any given rhyme scheme NOT terminating in heroic couplet.¹³

The notion of Spenserian transition is slightly more complicated. In essence, the idea is that a line in the second or third quatrain of a sonnet inherits its rhyme from a line in the preceding quatrain. The transition has simple, interior and wholesale cases:-

blog dating from 2012, a commendable enough effort not lacking in charm, although the scansion from line 5 onwards needs quite a lot of work, and the abundance of ad hoc filler phrases is somewhat off-putting:-

Tempus Ambigua

Time is a concept quite beyond my ken.
String theory baffles brilliant folks and me.
I'll not wax philosophic then again
Perhaps I did already, shame on me.
Time keeps everything in order you see.
For flies who's life-cycle completes in one day,
Men and boys would be distinct I would say.
We can tell a larva and the grown fly
are one and the same. Flies would see two types
of animals that grouped but would not know why.
Our sense of time is different awake
or when we sleep, and by task goodness sake.
Don't tell a guy that seconds are the same
while shoveling manure or kissing a dame.

¹³ In this connection, we may also speak of a Shakespearean sestet as a Shakespearean quatrain followed by a heroic couplet

- Simple: the first line of a given quatrain inherits its rhyme from the final line of the preceding quatrain, as in: ABABBCBCCDCDEE.
- Interior: the second and/or third lines of a given quatrain inherit their rhymes from the corresponding lines of the preceding quatrain, as in: ABBACBBCDEFDEF.
- Wholesale: the transition is both simple and interior, as in: ABBAABBACDECDE.

We are now in a position to define a Petrarchan, a Shakespearean and a Spenserian sonnet as, respectively,

(i) a Petrarchan octet - i.e. two Petrarchan quatrains - followed by a Petrarchan sestet. Although Petrarch's own sonnets featured wholesale Spenserisation, as in e.g. ABBAABBACDECDE, nevertheless in my schema the Petrarchan sonnet need not and typically does not feature Spenserisation, and in a typical case goes e.g. ABBACDDCEFGEFG. The very first sonnet featured in the present collection, Sonnet 10, exemplifies this latter form, whereas Sonnets 24 and 27 have Petrarchan octets, but violate the Petrarchan convention by terminating in heroic couplet.

(ii) three Shakespearean quatrains followed by a heroic couplet, as in: ABABCDCEFEFGG. During my time as a composer of sonnets, the Shakespearean form - or variations or violations thereof - has been my preferred mode of expression. Inter alia Sonnets 53, 74, 75, and my solitary French sonnet 141 all exemplify the (at least more or less) conventional Shakespearean sonnet.

(iii) a Shakespearean sonnet with simple Spenserian transitions between each quatrain: ABABBCBCCDCDEE. I haven't written more than two or three Spenserian sonnets, and none feature in the present volume.

No disquisition on the sonnet is complete without an animadversion to the notion of the Volta, or 'turn', which is a feature of the traditional structure of a sonnet, whereby a Problem is introduced in the first quatrain, Elaborated upon in the second quatrain, and its ultimate

Resolution signposted by the Volta, often by means of change of tense or personal perspective, e.g. from third person to first person. The Volta is more naturally characteristic of the Petrarchan form, with its ready-made distinction between opening octet and concluding sestet, with the volta typically occurring in line 9. Nevertheless it is also a frequent not to say standard feature of Shakespearean sonnet, in which respect consider my comic sonnet 75, included in the present volume and also reproduced here:-

In the opening quatrain, the Problem is introduced in the form of the M4 motorway service station Leigh Delamere reimaged in the vocative mood as a Pre-Raphaelite poet of middling ability.

*Leigh Delamere, you should have written verse:
a minor, whimsical, Pre-Raphaelite,
or modernist perhaps, but not too terse,
although stooping betimes into the trite.*

The second quatrain Elaborates upon the Problem by considering what supposedly happens at motorway service stations: the selling of over-priced petrol and swinger orgies in the Travelodge. The mood is still vocative - your stodge is chewed, your petrol bought, your Travelodge defiled, and your khazi slandered.

*Now come we in our cars to chew your stodge,
buy petrol - ludicrously over-priced -
take part in orgies in your Travelodge,
and moan about your toilets not being nice.*

The third quatrain begins with the Volta in line 9, where the change of mood is indicated by the shift from vocative to first person perspective and the introduction of the figure of Porlock, the disruptor of Samuel Taylor Coleridge's opium fever-dream composition of Xanadu; and continues with the narrator's own participation in the sordid follies of the second quatrain.

*Leigh Delamere, I've been your Porlock too.
I've visited your stately pleasure dome*

*skidmarked your nylon sheets and blocked your loos,
stolen your towels and buggered off back home.*

The ultimate Resolution is postponed, as is often the case with Shakespearean sonnets, until the concluding heroic couplet, in which the narrator apologises for his transgressions:-

*For these foul desecrations, let this be,
Leigh Delamere, my true apology.*

Sonnet 93, also included in the present collection, is a decidedly self-referential discussion of the sonnet form, although a certain amount of violence is ironically perpetrated on the conventional Problem-Elaboration-Volta-Resolution structure.¹⁴ The violence begins early, with the multiple enjambments between lines 2-3, 3-4, and 4-5. The last of these is perhaps the most controversial, insofar as it causes the Problem aired in the first quatrain to bleed into its successor rather than marking a clean break between the two.

*Sonnets? It is, always, a discipline.
The fourteen lines, choice of Petrarchan or
Shakespearean rhyme. And stuff your protest in
the octet if you can, in order for
line nine to play the volta or fly half.*

Line 6 compounds the sense of jarring with its reference to the sonnet's resolution when we are in fact less than half way through *this particular* sonnet. And despite lines 4-5 instructing the aspiring sonneteer to place his or her Volta conventionally in line 9, in the present case it's difficult to specify which if any line fulfils the Volta function: any of 6, 10, 11 and 13 is possible, whereas 9 is quite a weak candidate. I'm tempted to regard 9 as the bridesmaid or John-the-Baptist to the Volta in 10.

*The resolution on the rhyme depends:
in Petrarch mode, the sestet's bitter laugh*

¹⁴ Henceforth, "PEVR structure" throughout.

*drags out the calvary of penitence.
In the Shakespearean, 'tis brutally fact,
that final couplet shall poignard disclose.
Marry, it doth, and sentence eke enacts
among super-abundant King James hose.
Some bodkin's stabbed up some unguarded arse;
churned tragedy curdles as Whitehall farce.*

Despite regarding myself primarily as a writer of Shakespearean sonnets, my *chevauchée* through the SMB and the OEFS has revealed somewhat to my own surprise that there are really quite abundant variations on the theme, along the following axes.

- **Trochaic/Spondaic Substitution.**¹⁵ Consider the lines just quoted from SMB S93. “In the [Shakespearean] ...” is arguably trochaic, “marry it doth ...” has a similar feel, and “Churned tragedy ...” feels like a spondaic substitution.
- **Imperfect Rhyme.** This can vary from simple singular/plural and present/past cases to masculine vs feminine rhyme, to other interesting blemishes.

In respect of imperfect rhymes of the first sort, consider firstly the bathetic pair ‘art’ and ‘farts’ in SMB S24’s lines 6-8 and secondly the concluding sestet of the same sonnet:-

*Along the jetty, fauvist headache art
enticed the frozen-blooded coprophage.
The harbour smelt quite pungently of farts.*

Here the imperfection is very straightforwardly singular vs plural.

¹⁵ This subject is covered in forensic detail by Andrew Benson Brown, to whom I acknowledge my debt, in his excellent podcast for the Society of Classical Poets [for ref. see earlier fn]. It should be noted that each example cited above conforms with Brown’s aesthetic rule that a given line should not feature more than one substitution. N.B. Brown only mentions trochaic substitutions, but I suspect he would agree about the applicability of analogous considerations in spondaic cases.

Note that I could at any time have replaced 'farts' with 'fart', but have chosen not to because I think that in this case the violence done to rhyme purity serves some kind of purpose - signalling bathos, perhaps. In the two cases in the sestet, there is not the same latitude. We have 'killed' vs 'hill' and the singular/plural case of 'trees' vs 'St Exupery', both of which solecisms - if that is how we regard them - seem hard to avoid without loss of sense:-

*Not caring what the Salafists might preach
or who, just promenading, might be killed:
a lively market in the shade of trees.
A cemetery slumbered on the beach.
Upon the brown pine needle-coated hill,
the monument to Saint-Exupéry.*

In the case of SMB S56, the rhyme imperfection is altogether of a different sort:-

*The editor considers Pope passé,
but is quite partial to a shopping list.
"Stick to Sauternes, Prosecco's far too gassy."*

Here, the clash is between line 1's orthodox masculine iambic line ending 'passé' and line 3's feminine ending 'gassy'. A second example of this case is furnished in the first quatrain of SMB S59:-

*No barbarous australopithecine
shall squirt his jet on your concavity,
in which there lurks no turquoise rusk of pine,
for you're ephemeral and really witty ...*

Here, again, line 2's orthodox masculine iambic line ending "concavity" jars with line 4's feminine ending "witty".

Rhyme Scheme Deviations. Perhaps the two most common types of rhyme scheme deviation are *Shakespearean/Petrarchan (S/P) Hybrids* and *Rhyme Inversions*.

An *S/P Hybrid* is a sonnet - which may or may not be conventional in other respects, e.g. in its compliance with the formative constraint of being written in iambic pentameter - which combines elements of both the Shakespearean and Petrarchan formal structure. Intuitively the most obvious and common deviations of this type are

- (i) the co-occurrence within the same sonnet of Shakespearean and Petrarchan quatrains e.g. ABABCDDC or conversely ABBACDCD; there are no examples of this in the present collection.
- ii) the co-occurrence within the same sonnet of a Shakespearean octet i.e. two Shakespearean quatrains, followed by a Petrarchan sestet. There are several examples of this tendency in the present collection, which are highlighted as and when they occur.
- (iii) three Petrarchan quatrains concluding with a heroic couplet.¹⁶ There are several instances of this variation in the present collection, of which SMB 26 and 27 are early examples.

A *Rhyme Inversion* comes about when a sonnet - which again may or may not be conventional in other respects - has a rhyme scheme which is the reverse of a canonical rhyme scheme. A good example of this form is SMB S58 below, my satire of Damien Hirst's Pickled Shark, which as shall be seen has the rhyme scheme AABCBCDEDEFGFG, which as a heroic couplet followed by three Shakespearean quatrains is exactly the reverse of the conventional Shakespearean rhyme.

The poems in the present collection are accompanied by commentaries on form and content. As regards form, I have taken on board some of the insights of Andrew Benson Brown (q.v. preceding footnotes), in developing the notion of a 'sonnet puritan', the custodian of a set of conventions regulating what counts as 'good form' in a sonnet, to be variously conformed to experimented with or set at defiance by our sonneteers.¹⁷ These are:-

¹⁶ Or, if you like, a Petrarchan octet followed by a Shakespearean sestet - see earlier fn.

¹⁷ A fruitful comparison might be with the 19th century French dramatist Eugène Scribe's notion of the 'well-made play'.

- A sonnet has 14 lines.
- A sonnet is written in iambic pentameter.
- A sonnet rhymes perfectly throughout.
- A sonnet features no more than one trochaic/spondaic substitution per line.¹⁸
- A sonnet features perfect quatrain/PEVR alignment, i.e. the Problem is wholly captured in Q1, the Elaboration in Q2, and the Resolution in the remainder of the sonnet.
- A corollary of the preceding convention is the location of the Volta in line 9.

Turning to the question of content, the sonnets in the present collection often fall into one or more of the following classes, viz.

- The **humorous**, the obvious example of which being, again, SMB S75.
- The **contrarian**. Here I'm thinking once more of the critiques of conceptual art embodied in SMB S58 and S59.
- The **jeremiad**, in which I vent my splenetic conservatism. Examples of this tendency are SMB S83, S89 and S120.
- The **debauchiad**. See again SMB S75, and also S64, S146 and OEFS XX.
- The **self-referential**. These sonnets commonly take the form either of descriptions of the sonnet-writing process q.v. SMB S93 and S109, or of my struggles as an artist with my own indolence and with the legacy publishing industry. Examples of mein Kampf als Schriftsteller abound in the present collection - see in particular SMB S53, S56 and S69.

A frequent preoccupation in sonnets of the latter type is with what I am tempted to call the Satirist's Dilemma. As a late middle-aged White conservative man living in a woke and hipsterish inner-city Bristolian suburb, I suspect that my disgust at my own shortcomings and at the societal degeneracy which it is my job as a satirist to chronicle

¹⁸ There is here the conceptual room for an ultra puritan - or Calvinist perhaps - disdaining all trochaic/spondaic substitution.

adversely affects my health.¹⁹ However, were I to relocate to a more salubrious neighbourhood I would lose access to my creative material and my inner life would be less fulfilling. Thus SMB S10 immediately following.

¹⁹ In this connection, q.v. the commentary accompanying SMB S70.