REINVENTING THE WHEEL

MODERN POEMS IN CLASSICAL METERS

by Lewis Turco

When I was seventeen or eighteen years old I invented classical meters. That is to say, I *thought* I was inventing something new, but it turned out that I was *re*inventing what we now call "quantitative verse." It was the ancient Greeks who actually invented it.

Here is what I did, unwittingly. "Free verse," that is to say, "prose," was all the rage among poets in the 1940's and early 1950's, so I wrote the first stanza of a poem (see "A Life," below) in "free verse." At this point, it was pure prose, nothing else. However, before I wrote the second stanza I "scanned" the first to see exactly where the unaccented and accented syllables fell — one can scan any language. I intended to write the second stanza in exactly the same rhythms I had used in the first, line for line. Here are the first stanza's "meters" (the pattern of sequential stressed and unstressed syllables, though there were no "meters," actually, until I wrote the second stanza):

′ ◡ ′ ′ ◡ ′ ◡ ′
1. Blinding! Strange! Warmth transformed to chill

◡ ′ ◡ ′ ◡ ′ ◡ ′ ◡ ′ ◡ ′
2. Within a spinning colorwheel of dim and dark.

◡ ′ ◡ ′ ◡ ′ ◡ ′ ◡ ′ ◡ ′ ◡ ′
3. A terrifying mushrooming of cacophonic sound

◡ ′ ′ — ′ ◡ ′ ◡ ′ ◡ ′ ◡
4. Surrounds, swells — bursts upon untested senses.

′ ◡ ◡ ′ ◡ ◡ ′ ◡ ′ ◡
5. Vivid impressions uproot well-being

◡ ′ ◡ ◡ ′
6. And dissipate peace.

′ ′ ◡ ′ ◡ ′ ◡ ′ ◡
7. Thus, looming huge and uninvited,

◡ ′ ◡ ′ ◡ ′ ◡ ′ ◡ ′ ◡
8. Implacably destroying placid blackness,

◡ ′ ◡ ′ ◡ ′
9. The ogre Birth arrives.

Note in line four that the dash indicates a pause in the line, a *caesura*, in this case a *compensatory caesura* because it is taking the place of an unstressed syllable. The accent mark, called a "macron" (′) indicates that a syllable is stressed in the word; the "breve" (∪) indicates that a syllable is unstressed. Both these marks are *always* placed above the vowel of the syllable in question (all syllables in English contain a vowel). Here are the rules for scansion in English as I formulated them in an essay titled "Verse vs. Prose / Prosody vs. Meter," originally published in *Meter in English, A Critical Engagement*, edited by David Baker for the University of Arkansas, 1997, pp. 249-263 and subsequently included in *The Book of Forms: A Handbook of Poetics*, third edition, University Press of New England, 2000:

1. In every English word with two or more syllables, at least one syllable will be stressed. If you cannot hear the stresses at first, a dictionary can help with pronunciation.
2. Important single-syllable words, particularly *verbs* and *nouns*, generally take strong stresses.
3. Unimportant single-syllable words in the sentence, such as *articles* (such as "a" or "the"), *prepositions* (such as "of" or "in"), and *pronouns* (such as "he" or "them") (except *demonstrative pronouns* like "this," "that," "these," "those") do not take strong stresses, though they may take *secondary stresses* through *promotion* or *demotion*, depending on their position in the sentence or the line of verse.
4. In any series of three unstressed syllables in a line of verse, one of them, generally the middle syllable, will take a *secondary stress* through *promotion* and will be counted as a *stressed* syllable (indicated by a dot: •).
5. In any series of three stressed syllables in a line of verse, one of them, generally the middle syllable, will take a *secondary stress* through *demotion* and will be counted as an *unstressed* syllable (indicated by a dot: •).
6. *Any* syllable may be rhetorically stressed by means of some typographical ploy. A poet can call attention to a word that would not usually be stressed metrically through italics, capitalization or other visual emphasis of the word.

There are four *standard verse feet* in English prosody: the *iamb* is a *verse foot* of two syllables, the second of which is stressed (∪ ′); the *anapest* has three syllables, the third of which is stressed (∪ ∪ ′); the *trochee* has two syllables, the first of which is stressed (′ ∪); and the *dactyl* has three syllables, the first of which is stressed (′ ∪ ∪).

There are several *minor verse feet* in English prosody, usually used as variations only: the *acephalous* (headless) *iamb* is a foot of one stressed syllable (′), as is the *catalectic* (tailless) *trochee* (′). One can tell these two feet apart only from their position in a line of verse. They occur, for instance, when the unstressed first syllable of an iamb is dropped in order to vary the rhythm of a line of verse (see line 4, above), or when the unstressed second syllable of a trochee is dropped for the same reason.

The *spondee* (*distributed*, *hovering accent*) is a verse foot of two syllables, both of which are accented (′ ′). The iamb, trochee, and spondee are *double meters*: verse feet made up of two syllables. The *amphibrach* is a *rocking foot* of three syllables, only the second of which is stressed (∪ ′ ∪); The anapest, dactyl, and amphibrach are *triple meters*: verse feet made up of three syllables. The *Ionic* (double iamb) is a foot of four syllables, the first two unstressed and the second two stressed (∪ ∪ ′ ′). It equals two iambs in a line of verse. Classical prosodists would say that the Ionic (double iamb) is a combination of two shorter feet, the *pyrrhic* or *dibrach* (∪ ∪) and the *spondee* (′ ′). The pyrrhic, however, does not seem to appear elsewhere in

English prosody, unless as a variation in a trochaic poem that reverses the Ionic (double iamb) and would substitute for two trochees and perhaps best be identified as a *Greater Ionic* (double trochee) (′ ′ ∪ ∪).

The meters of quantitative verse are *prescribed*. In other words, when you write a line in a particular quantitative verse form, you must write the line in a specified arrangement of feet. For instance, in the Greek form called *Sapphics*, the *Sapphic line* is composed of two trochees, a dactyl, and two trochees, in that order, although certain substitutions are allowed at prescribed places. This is a Sapphic line: ′ ∪ ′ ∪ ′ ∪ ∪ ′ ∪ ′ ∪. The *Sapphic stanza* is made up of three such lines plus a line called an *adonic*, which is a dactyl and a trochee, in that order: ′ ∪ ∪ ′ ∪. It is an unrhymed (*blank verse*, NOT "free verse") quatrain.

There are exactly eleven syllables in a Sapphic line. It contains five verse feet, so it is a *pentameter* line. While it is true that trochees predominate, since their positions in the line are *prescribed*, they are not *normative* (this is *not* a line of five trochees). In normative verse, all of the feet in a line would be identical to each other, such as the common English verse Iambic pentameter in which a line is made of five iambs (∪ ′ ∪ ′ ∪ ′ ∪ ′ ∪ ′). In prescriptive verse, the specified feet within a line may be different from each other. Both normative verse and prescriptive verse allow for certain occasional variations and substitutions within lines.

On the following page, as translated into English *prosody* (a system of versification), are the classical verse feet, lines and couplets:

TABLE of METERS

Black = foot
Green = line
Blue = couplet

NAME	SCANSION	EXAMPLE
Acephalous iamb:	′	Halt!
Adonic line:	′∪∪′∪	Sounding the silence
Aeolic line:	∪∪′∪′	If I love her, what?
Amphibrach:	∪′∪	Whenever
Amphimacer – see *Cretic*		
Anacreontic line:	∪∪′′∪′∪∪	If we love wine, then what shall be
Anapest:	∪∪′	With despair
Catalectic trochee:	′	Hark!
Choriamb:	′∪∪′	She is my love
Choriambic line:	′∪ ′∪∪′ ′∪∪′ ′∪∪′ ∪′	Love for drink's a mistake not to be brooked! Capture the pair of them!
Classical hexameter line:	′∪∪ ′∪∪ ′∪∪ ′∪∪ ′∪∪ ′′	Lead for this talisman. Pure, so that Saturn will live in it. Pure lead.
Classical pentameter line:	′∪∪ ′∪∪ ′′ ∪∪′ ∪∪′	Both of its faces are rubbed smooth. On its front, in a star
Cretic (amphimacer):	′∪′	German bread
Dactyl:	′∪∪	Alamo
Dactylo-epitrite line:	′∪∪′∪∪′ *or* ′∪∪′∪∪′′	What if an elephant came? *or* What if an elephant came home?
Dibrach (pyrrhic):	∪∪	Or if
Elegiac couplet (a classical hexameter plus a classical pentameter):	′∪∪ ′∪∪ ′∪∪ ′∪∪ ′∪∪ ′′ ′∪∪ ′∪∪ ′′ ∪∪′ ∪∪′	Lead for this talisman. Pure, so that Saturn will live in it. Pure lead. Both of its faces are rubbed smooth. On its front, in a star
English heroic line (iambic pentameter):	∪ ′∪ ′∪′∪ ′∪ ′	He loved the world a bit too much, it seems
English heroic couplet (two lines of iambic pentameter verse):	∪ ′∪ ′∪′∪ ′∪ ′ ∪ ′∪ ′∪′∪ ′∪ ′	He loved the world a bit too much, it seems, And therefore lost his grip upon his dreams
Greater Ionic (double trochee):	′ ′∪ ∪	Her heart is a
Hendecasyllabic line:	′∪′∪ ∪′∪′∪′∪	Looking out of the high school classroom window
Iamb:	∪′	To be
Ionic (double iamb):	∪ ∪ ′′	Is it her heart?
Pyrrhic – see *dibrach*		
Sapphic line:	′∪′∪ ′ ∪ ∪′∪′∪	Now the frost is falling in all our gardens
Spondee:	′′	Dang blast!
Trochee:	′∪	Darn it!

Here is the whole of the poem in which as a teen-ager I thought I had invented quantitative meters:

A LIFE

Blinding! Strange! Warmth transformed to chill

Within a spinning colorwheel of dim and dark.

A terrifying mushrooming of cacophonic sound

Surrounds, swells — bursts upon untested senses.

Vivid impressions uproot well-being

And dissipate peace.

Thus, looming huge and uninvited,

Implacably destroying placid blackness,

The ogre Birth arrives.

Gently once; then with sweeping tides

That overflow the curbs of reason, flush all sense

Through ducts of passion, turning moons to lamps which fool the feet

With vague shapes, changing solids into shadows, shades

Forming impediments, come messengers

Who beat upon life’s

Door, asking that the gate be opened

For Time’s forever golden mistress,

The fickle hussy, Love.

Clouds of thick, omnipresent fog,

Maliciously released from underworldly caves

Send suffocating fingers feeling, reeling through each nerve

And choke, halt breath with molten sobs that seem

Planning on separating mind from flesh.

Here, staring and white,

Comes creeping insidiously through mists...,

Impalpable, but by no means impotent,

The king of darkness, Fear.

Writhing fire! Reason is consumed,

And all that's left is searing flame and withering heat!

An incandescent, soul-devouring holocaust of rage

Destroys mind. Roaring in an oven made of blood,

Scorching everything that it can touch,

It chars its own hearth.

Here, coughing smoke and spitting brimstone,

Inhabitant of white infernos,

Stands Evil's minion, Hate.

Twisted claws reach with palms upturned

And, in a fit of avarice, grasp everything

That they can hold; and still they stretch and clutch for even more!

Immense force! Moving men like puppets on a stage,

Pulling with a strength beyond compare...,

But leading nowhere!

Showing tantalizing threads of gold,

But made of gossamer, comes

Ambition's cohort, Greed.

Abject. Dark. Buried in a marsh

From which there seems to be no path or exitway;

Within a mire of apathy and thwarted love of life;

Without Hope, dwells a creature known to many men,

Lost in lonely voids and labyrinths

Of mind and of being;

Sunk in depths from which it can't escape,

Abaddon's bleak companion,

The wanderer, Despair.

Peaceful Sleep. Welcome night of life,

Enclosing flesh within a restful bed of gravel,

The final slumber spreads its mantle over mind and soul,

Destroys light flooding worlds of harshness we have left

Lying on the bed of consciousness.

Disturbing our dreams.

Finally, to life's parade of images,

A long-locked door has opened

To Death the gatherer.

I carried out a somewhat similar, if more complicated, scheme in a slightly later poem that appeared in my 1960 *First Poems* where it bore the title, "Ode for the Beat Generation"; however, the original title was "Time Goes Down in Mirrors." The idea was to surround the title in the first stanza with two rhymed lines that had the same meters: ∪ ′ ∪ ′ ∪ . The second stanza would add two more rhyming lines with the opposite meter (a "mirror image" as it were): ′ ∪ ′ ∪ ′ . And again in the third stanza; this time the meter would be normative iambic tetrameter: ∪ ′ ∪ ′ ∪ ′ ∪ ′ for both lines, and the fourth stanza would repeat the plan. Then, in the fifth stanza, while the central line remained the same, the lines above and below it would be inverted:

TIME GOES DOWN IN MIRRORS

Sophia chatters.

Time goes down in mirrors,

for nothing matters.

Horace listens while

Sophia chatters.

Time goes down in mirrors,

for nothing matters;

Hence, his worldly smile.

The phonograph spins out its tune.

Horace listens while

Sophia chatters.

Time goes down in mirrors,

for nothing matters.

Hence, his worldly smile:

The pair will love each other soon.

Outdoors, the shadows listen as

The phonograph spins out its tune.

Horace listens while

Sophia chatters.

Time goes down in mirrors,

for nothing matters.

Hence, his worldly smile:

The pair will love each other soon,

Their movements metronomed by jazz.

Sophia chatters.

Horace listens while

The phonograph spins out its tune.

Outdoors the shadows listen as

Time goes down in mirrors.

Their movements metronomed by jazz,

The pair will love each other soon.

Hence! his worldly smile...,

For nothing matters.

The first poem I deliberately wrote in classical meters, also published in my *First Poems*, was this poem, "Visitor," in Sapphic stanzas, a verse form ascribed to the 7th-6th century B. C. poet Sappho who lived on the Greek island of Lesbos. I recall composing it in Storrs, Connecticut, while I was an undergraduate student at the University of Connecticut, probably about 1959.

VISITOR

"*A guest is not a guest if he does not enter.*"

Visitor, you've come and you've gone while I was

gone, while winds were moving through open windows,

billowing the drapes in my vacant chambers,

sounding the silence;

come and gone, whoever you were, and left no

note but quiet sliding among the shadows.

Here before my house, by the stolid doorway,

I remain watching,

listening where you must have lingered, waiting.

I stand listening for the bell's thin echo,

knowing for a certainty you were here and

left without echo.

All will turn out differently now. Behind this

door there stands an alien future. Words that

needed speaking have not been spoken, and the

time that has not been

spent correctly now must be handled strangely,

sold less truly, used in another manner.

Sounds have not been breasted. The stillness thickens

over your footfalls.

Visitor, between us are tunnels sealed and

hollow; there are depths where once there were crossings.

There are windows, too, gone opaque with wonder,

darkling with questions.

The English heroic line (see the table of meters) is not a quantitative accentual-syllabic verse form like the classical Greek meters, but a normative accentual-syllabic verse form. "Heroic" meters are those that are used by the composers of the major epics of a nation or culture; thus, the Greek epic writers used the classical hexameter line and the classical pentameter line. But the English epic writers used the normative iambic pentameter line, usually unrhymed, although in the 18th century Alexander Pope and others used the rhymed *heroic couplet*. A *heroic couplet* is two lines of rhyming iambic pentameter. Greeks used the *elegiac couplet* which combined the classical hexameter line and the classical pentameter line.

The following poem, also from *First Poems*, is written in iambic pentameter blank (unrhymed) verse, which is the English heroic line. There aren't many metrical variations in the

lines; however, the syntax (word order) of the sentences has been altered through a rhetorical device called *hypallage* (inversion of word order in a line):

A TALE OF RIVERS AND A BOY

Long once ago in our town was a boy

moon blue grass sparse as August's thirsty bones

who down to rivers ran to sense them flow

between all acorns grown as tall as high

to saline waters difficult to con

down dawn thin valleys down the arching land

through evenings bridging hamlets inland up

with hills along the pulsing bays

New moon

plus booked Septembers watched the boy turn his

new leaves now olding out to fall upon

the bent back of an autumn wild with wind

and soft with warm ideas lately fact

to find if underneath were not the core

that bore the trifling nut of everything

his lonely rivers were

Then when the moon

was snowy as the skeleton of worlds

entombed in catacombs of seasoned bones

the boy down slid to know the rivers' ice

to touch intrepid soles to surfaces

of fluid solid as a skin may crust

and wonder when would this bleak water heave

down patient banks

The moon switched green at last

among the drops of cloudy rivers down

upon their muddy parents falling out

of springing skies and also on the boy

attentive now to tributary suns

who stood on brinks and dams with eyes to note

the rivers molt and snake away again

toward the bays where moons conceive

But now

there's no more in our anytown one boy

no moon blue boy for flesh has grown and gone

along the riverflow long down ago

to reassert the disbelief of minds

and find again that rivers cannot go

but round and round as moons go round and round

to chase the seasons through subsiding years

It was a long time between these early poems and my next attempt at a work in quantitative meters. “A Talisman” was published in *Modern Poetry Studies* in 1971 while I was teaching at the State University of New York at Oswego. It followed a formula for an occult talisman, and it was written in elegiac couplets (see the table of meters) for a desperately ill friend and colleague:

A TALISMAN

for Dave McLean, too late.

Lead for this talisman. Pure, so that Saturn will live in it. Pure lead.

Both of its faces are rubbed smooth. On its front, in a star

pentagram, cut with a diamond burin a scythe so that Nabam,

standing defending his great tau shall be laid under earth,

old as he is — by Oriphiel, angel of Saturday. Our Lord,

nailed to a T, is the capstone of this coin made of lead,

though he will never appear in his person, but only as backdrop.

Grave on the opposite face this, in a hexagon star:

REMPHA, surrounding the head of a bull. Without witnesses carve your

talisman. Wear it in good health. It will keep you from death,

frighten the devil of cancer, leukemia — rot of the white bone.

Marrow will redden then. Wear this! It will save you and me.

Bear it — your talisman; wear it, my brother. Or carry this poem,

Dies Saturni, to life’s end. It is all I can do.

My third poem in classical measures (published in *The Kansas Quarterly* in 1992), like the first, was written in Sapphic stanzas; however, I added something to the form, a rhetorical device called *prolepsis* which expands upon a general statement, particularizing it and giving further information regarding it. As this poem progresses the same basic statement is repeated and expanded upon while the meters of the stanza itself remain true to the form:

SAPPHIC STANZAS IN FALLING MEASURES

Now the frost is falling in all our gardens.

Fall has rimed itself with the call of autumn.

Now that frost, in crystals and webs, is falling

Out of the dawn in

All our gardens, summer has fallen out of

Rime in crystals, webs, and the dawn in voices

Calling on the westerly winds of changing

Weathers and climates.

Now the frost — in tentative webs and crystals

Falling from the dawning to all our gardens

Vined and gourded — has rimed itself with autumn

Calls of the fliers

Gliding on the westerlies. Changing weathers

Send our northern sojourners on their searches

After other climates, for now that autumn

Falls in a rime of

Crystal webs on all of our summer gardens

Vined and gourded, riming itself with sounding

Calls of fliers gliding upon the western

Winds in these changing

Weathers, dawns will shatter in all our climates:

South, the flocks of sojourners fall and settle

Out of early light in a hoarfrost made of

Springtime and summer.

Toward the end of January 2003 I began deliberately and systematically to write poems in the classical meters. I remarked to my wife at the time that I thought something was about to happen, but I had no idea what. Nevertheless, the first poem I wrote was the second stanza or *antistrophe* of the following ode, which is a poem that celebrates an event. There are several types of ode, three more or less strict forms, the first of which is the *Pindaric ode*, derived from the *choral ode* of the *classical tragedy*. The *choral ode* is constructed of three parts, the first of which is the *strophe*. The second movement, called the *antistrophe*, is identical in *structure* to the first. The third and last movement of the poem is called the *stand* or *epode*. Its form is strict, like the first two movements, but entirely different from their structure.

The content of the strophe is an argument in favor of a *viewpoint* which is spoken by a chorus on one side of the stage. To consider the opposite view, the chorus travels to the other side of the stage to deliver the antistrophe, through which it voices its concerns, or there is a second chorus on the opposite side of the stage that does the same. In the epode, the chorus moves to center stage to deliver its conclusion upon the matter under consideration. Basically, the Pindaric ode is a choral ode without the play.

Although this poem following has a strophe, an antistrophe, and an epode, all of which are in strict meters, it is not a Pindaric ode because the first two parts are not identical. It would have to be called a *nonce ode*: a poem marking an event written strictly for the occasion in its own invented form. The second section of the poem, also written before the event itself, is the epode. The strophe was the last portion composed:

COLUMBIAN ODE

Strophe: Choriambics

When *Columbia* broke up in the skies over the western states

February the first, 2003, everyone watched the tape

Loop repeatedly. We sat in the web spun by the spider once

More, as often we'd done since the defunct century flushed itself

Down historical tubes: maybe we knew nothing would come to pass

After all in our dim consciousness. What happens when we expect

Something, usually? Not much. It's the bad joke of the Laughing God

Who will wait while the Earth spins in the dark spaces between his toes

Till the moment we least look for any tragedy. Then he hits

Hard. We think that we've grown — harder than nails, shields that

surround our souls!

What a joke! We are knocked flat on our broad backs and discover once

More how vulnerable Man is to Fate's blows. We are fragile still.

Antistrophe: Alcaics

No song is sung or elegy spoken as

Great sorrow settles over a tragedy,

Falls into chasms opened into

Misery. How shall we find our mourning's

True voice in keening, hopeless despair, or in

Wounds newly suffered — coins to be squandered on

Grief governed not by thought but feelings?

Time is required for grief to ripen

Into melody, into sorrow's music.

Epode: Hendecasyllabics

Into melody, into sorrow's music

There will quietly steal another lyric

After all of the requiems have ended,

After most of the mourners have departed.

It will be but a bar or two of heartbeat

Just at first, but a murmur in the bloodstream

Building finally to a constant drumming

Running through the aortas to the fingers,

To the toe-tips and belly. It will be like

Springtime touching the edges of a frozen

Mountain rivulet which, in its descending

Over gradients of downland, brings renewal

To the valleys below. The world begins to

Stir again and the eyes begin to open

Onto vapors arising over waters

Lying under the glimmering of daylight.

The scansion of *hendecasyllabics* is laid out in the table of meters. A hendecasyllabic line is a line of eleven syllables. The line begins with a trochee, then there is a dactyl, then three more trochees — the dactyl is always the second foot in classical poems. However, why shouldn't the dactyl travel? That is the idea behind these *progressive hendecasyllabics*. The dactyl begins in its wonted place, but then it begins to travel up the line, into the third foot, then the fourth, then the fifth, then into the first foot and back to its starting spot, and so on to the end of the poem:

A ROW OF HEDGES

Looking out of the high school classroom window

I could see a row of declining hedges

That extended past the frame of the window

Into who knew what that lay awaiting us.

That is a decent image! I remember

Thinking, *one I can drape my senior essay*

Over with a minimal effort. So I

Did. I wrote "A Row of Hedges," submitted

It and waited. One can loiter overly

Long. It has been a lifetime. Looking down that

Ancient hedgerow from this new vantage, one can

Almost see the place where it has its ending.

There is mist behind me. Shadowy figures

Flicker in and out of focus. Have I been

Dreaming of metaphors and similes for

Living all of these years? And am I sitting

Still in adolescent bemusement, waiting

For the hedge to wither, for the daydream to

Die in a fall beyond the darkened window?

And back to Sapphics for a third time, this time in response to a contest in 2004 by the Academy of American Poets in which three elements of a sentence from Eliot, “April is the cruellest month” (“April,” “cruellest” and “month”) must be used at least once in the poem:

SAPPHICS FOR APRIL

“April is the cruellest month,” the poet

says. But then what’s March, or the other ten, one

wonders? Every month is a moon of mourning,

generally speaking.

Born in May, I dread it when April's over.
Here's another birthday I try finessing.
Then comes June beginning the days of summer —
    maybe it doesn't.

Graduation into the world of working:
fear and trembling for many, but for others
it is time to enter the Golden Years of
    useless retirement.

Ah! July! The twittering birdies sing you
songs of desuetudinous boredom, or you're
captive in your cubicle while the sun shines
    elsewhere for others.

August and July — they are sure to taunt you
with vacations over before they've started;
then September tells you to settle into
    fall for the long haul.

Here's October, skeletons in one's closet
open doors and warn you that here comes weather

stalking through November's perfidious notions.

Indian summer

plunges into winter and bleak December.
Holidays depress us and make us wish for
anything besides these unending carols

dunning our eardrums

in between advertisements. Here comes snowfall —
melancholy buries us in the thermal
January nightmare. And when we look for

respite from whiteness,

February blows us the kiss of madness:
March debouches into the muddy season.
After this "the cruellest month" continues

Nature's mandala.

Every month's the cruellest of the dozen,
one way or another. The wheel goes spinning
down the universe till at last we're flung off

into the silence.

This next poem occurred as a result of my working on the series of quantitative accentual-syallabic poems that began with “Sapphics in April.” I needed an example of a line written as a choriamb. The second line, an adonic line, happened immediately.

SONG FOR A GRANDDAUGHTER

Jessie’s my love,

Jessie’s my darling.

Jessie can fly

Just like a starling

Over the lawn,

Springtime and summer,

Over the snow

All through the winter,

And in the fall

Jessie can whistle

Over the leaves --

She is a thistle

Stuck to the wind,

Striking up laughter,

Playing my heart

Just like a zither.

Jessie can soar

Just like a starling

Jessie's my love,

Jessie's my darling.

Perhaps I was working up to writing an Anacreontic poem, which is a poem celebrating wine, women and song, when I next wrote this set of verses in rhyming amphibrachs to continue my series of quantitative accentual-syallabic poems:

LOVE'S DREAM

in amphibrachs

Whenever I see her I love her to pieces,

My love when she's missing morosely increases.

She's mine, yes she's mine if she knows it or doesn't,

She's nobody else's though elsewhere or present.

The moon may cease orbiting Earth on occasion,

The world may become but a kernel or raisin

Gone spinning about on its wobbling axis,

And Death may perhaps be less solid than taxes,

It matters no whit, not a tittle or tottle,

As long as I love her and cradle my bottle.

And here is the poem in Anacreontics, after the style of the 6th century B.C. poet from Teos, Anacreon. In modern times, Anacreontics is just a loose poem form, but there is a classical Anacreontic line form as well (see the table of meters) which here alternates with choriambic lines:

CHORIAMBIC ANACREONTICS

If we love wine, then what shall be

Done with women? with all those who are left high on the pedestal?

May we love them as well? Or must

Sights be lowered to knee height or perhaps less -- to the sisterhood

Of the streets? No! Surrendering

Love for drink's a mistake not to be brooked! Capture the pair of them!

She will love wine as well as a

Man does women and good wine! We may both revel in love and wine

Till the dawn breaks the window and

Daylight drowns all our sweet dreams of debauch, laurels us all with rue.

And that is a brief history of how I reinvented the wheel.