The Science Fiction Poetry Handbook

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edited by Mike Allen and Bud Webster

for the Science Fiction Poetry Association

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Preface

Welcome to the *Science Fiction Poetry Handbook*. I hope you will find it both interesting and useful.

All of the example poems used in this handbook were written by me, which is unusual for a book of this kind, and requires explanation. There were three good reasons for doing it this way.

First, using only my poems makes it possible for the Science Fiction Poetry Association (SFPA) to get this handbook out without the usual endless hassles of writing for permission to use the poems, and then corresponding about the permissions, and then clearing copyrights, and then raising funds to pay permissions fees, and so on.

Second, using my own work eliminates the problem of deciding who to include and who to leave out from among the rest of the science fiction poetry community. Leaving *everybody* out is scrupulously fair. As anyone who has put together a poetry anthology or similar publication knows, choosing a small number of poets and poems to include, from among a much larger number, is never done to the total satisfaction of anyone involved.

The third—and the most important—reason for using only my poems is that it lets me say anything whatsoever I want to say about them, which is appropriate to the intention of this book. If I had used other people's work I would not have been able to do that. I could have gotten away with praising poems by other people, even if not all readers agreed with my judgment. But I could not have said—in the way that I can freely say for my own work—that I'd included a particular poem because it was so *awful*. I couldn't have said that a particular poem was included "in spite of being a very bad poem" because I needed it there for other reasons.

I don't claim that the example poems I've used are all good poems.

On the contrary, some of them are dreadful, and the reasons why they are dreadful are instructive.

To see poems that are intended to represent only *good* science fiction poetry, please go to the poetry journals, the poetry anthologies, and the collected works of science fiction poets. (You'll find a list of sources in the "References & Suggested Readings" section of this handbook.) The only claim I make for my example poems is that they serve well to illustrate the point I am trying to make at the time.

I want to express my gratitude, and the SFPA's gratitude, to all the people who helped produce this volume: editor Bud Webster, who scoured through the scans of the original 1986 edition, hunting for machine-induced typos; poets Bruce Boston, Robert Frazier, Scott Green and Marge Simon, who helped flesh out Chapter 9; Boston again and poet Roger Dutcher, who pitched in to help update the bibliography; and cover artist Tim Mullins. Without their help, all of it donated to the SFPA, the project would have been impossible. I am especially grateful for the help of editor Mike Allen, who edited every part of this book and typeset it, and who has been there with whatever assistance I needed, every step of the way.

All royalties and other non-publisher profits for this volume go to support the Science Fiction Poetry Association; none come to me, or to SFPA officers or editors or functionaries. On behalf of the SFPA, I thank you for buying the book, and I look forward to any comments or criticisms that you might want to share with us.

Any errors or misperceptions you find are entirely my own responsibility and not that of the Science Fiction Poetry Association.

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Note:

1. Some of the material in this handbook has appeared previously, sometimes in a slightly different form, in *Star*Line: The Journal of the Science Fiction Poetry Association*.

Chapter One
Defining the Science Fiction Poem

Logically, I should be able to offer you a satisfactory definition of "a poem"—a *generic* poem—before moving on to a specific definition for a science fiction poem. Given the many centuries during which poetry has been spoken and written, you'd think that would be easy, but it most emphatically is not. There are plenty of definitions, but there's no consensus, and they range from the most nitpicking technical list of defining characteristics to the most brute-force "I know one when I see/hear one" statements.

The source of the difficulty lies in the way we have traditionally insisted on a binary, either/or, definition. We can always say that something either is or is not a frog; we have behaved as if that same precision should be possible for poetry. If we follow the lead of contemporary science and abandon this *is-or-is-not* attitude, we'll get farther with the task of definition.

We need to look at all of written language as a continuum, with the most unambiguously prosy prose at one extreme and the most unambiguously poetic poetry at the other, and an infinite number of gradations from prose to poetry in between. (Including the "prose poem," which is very popular in the field of science fiction poetry.) We could then say with confidence that poetic language has at least these three primary defining characteristics:

1. patterning that matters
2. deviance that matters
3. fierce resistance to change

The more a sequence of language can be shown to have these characteristics, the more likely it is that it's a poem; the less it has them, the more likely it is that it's prose.

Suppose I write a letter and include the sequence, "Send the cheese, please." By writing that sentence I will have produced a sequence of language made up of four one-syllable words, two of which rhyme. This is an example of language patterning, no question about it. It's also an example of deviance, because sentences of ordinary language don't contain that sort of patterning. But neither the patterning nor the deviance matters, and no poetry is intended; both of those characteristics are there by accident. If my letter goes on and on like that, however—with "No potatoes, just tomatoes" and "Mutter, mutter, send more butter"—it would be reasonable to assume that the effect is deliberate, and that it was at least my *intention* that it should matter.

Suppose I write the sentence, "I want to buy a house." It probably wouldn't make any difference to me if you changed that to "I'd like to buy a house" or "I want to buy a place to live." No damage would be done and no meaning would be lost. Poetry, however, is not like that. You can't take Oliver Wendell Holmes' line—"Build thee more stately mansions, O my soul"—and substitute "Build thee more stately big houses, O my soul" without doing damage.

If a sequence of language is a poem, changing it in any way will either ruin it or turn it into a *different* poem. When you can change a sequence of language without either of those things happening, you're dealing with prose.

We've defined "a poem" as a sequence of language that contains patterning and deviance that matter, and that cannot be changed without destroying its identity as that sequence. Using that as a foundation, we can move on to the question of what makes a sequence that has already been identified as a poem recognizable as a *science fiction* poem.

The Controversy

At this point I need to bring in some additional terms, because all of them are commonly used to refer to types of poems found in "science fiction poetry" publications and collections of "science fiction poetry." We need at least these five labels: science poem; fantasy poem; horror

poem; science fiction poem; speculative poem.

The science poem is about science, and may have no fictional aspect at all; for example, a sonnet about the second law of thermodynamics that takes no liberties with contemporary scientific knowledge is a science poem. A sonnet about unicorns, as long as no evidence for the existence of unicorns can be found, is a fantasy poem. A sonnet about vampires is almost always going to be a horror poem. These three terms are reasonably noncontroversial. It's only the terms "science fiction poem" and "speculative poem" that are argued about.

To my mind, the term "speculative poem" is so broad and so vague that it can include almost anything except the most traditional popular verse, and I'm not always certain that even that can be excluded. However, many poets (and many members of the SFPA) find the term useful as a label for their work, perhaps because it doesn't restrict them the way a more narrow term would. From the point of view of the business of being a poet today, "speculative poem" is an important term. It is the most popular cover term at the moment, and is commonly used to include all four of the other labels.

My personal definition for the science fiction poem itself has three parts:

1. A science fiction poem must be about a reality that is in some way different from the existing reality.

2. It must contain some element of science as a part of its focus.

3. It must contain some element of narrative—some "story" element.

The difference from existing reality may be very slight or it may be enormous—perhaps the poem gives earth a moon that is bright red, or mentions a contemporary world where U.S. Presidents are allowed to serve five terms, or claims that bacteria have the ability to feel sad. The science element can range from a single word—perhaps a line that reads "geology is my passion"—to lengthy and elaborate scientific content. The narrative element may be an entire plot with beginning and middle and end, or it may be nothing more than the message that can logically be derived from the reality-difference that the poem presents.

Consider the hypothetical poem about the sorrowing bacterium, for example. It could tell a story in which one bacterium observes another bacterium being killed (as a result of an antibiotic, perhaps), with all sorts of details about the second bacterium's suffering, and about the relationship between the two bacteria. Or there may be nothing more of

narrative than the derivable message, which is "Suppose there is a universe in which bacteria are capable of feeling sadness," with no other details supplied.

If I were putting together an anthology and needed a cover term, I would choose "science fiction poetry" rather than "speculative poetry." For me that term would include the fantasy and horror poems but it would exclude the science poems, because they are about existing reality as we know it and they contain no narrative element.

Many science fiction poets disagree with my definition; some of them feel that the narrative-element requirement holds back the field. The definition of "a science fiction poem" has been and still is a matter of controversy. (This was one of the reasons that I stepped down as editor of the SFPA journal *Star*Line* in the 1980s. I felt that it was unethical for me to base my selection of poems for *Star*Line* on a definition that wasn't accepted by the science fiction poetry community as a whole, and I didn't feel comfortable selecting poems for publication on the basis of someone else's criteria.)

I will leave it to you to decide which of the cover terms—"science fiction poem" or "speculative poem"—you prefer. If you like "speculative poem" better, that's fine. It won't create any problems for you in reading this handbook, since all science fiction poems would without question also be speculative poems.

Note

1. You'll notice that I've said nothing at all about "good" poems or "bad" poems. Finding that a living creature is a featherless biped mammal identifies it as a human being, but not as a "good" or "bad" human being. The very worst poem (for example, "Listen to the purple rain/falling on the Martian plain") is still a poem, just as the very worst human being is still a human being and not a kangaroo.

Chapter Two
Graphics Patterning: How the Poem Looks

Why the Graphics Level Is Important

It's safe to say that the graphics level in prose (that is, the print itself and the arrangement of the print on the page) is not really a stylistic resource for the writer. A book of prose may be so well-designed and so superbly printed and bound that we are struck by its beauty; in such cases the graphics level serves to establish the book itself, not its content, as an art object. The prose writer rarely has any control over such matters.

In poetry, however, the graphics level is of major importance to the writer. At minimum it will include those graphic devices which help to indicate that the sequence is intended to *be* a poem, such as line length and arrangement of the lines on a page. It will include the presence of a title, which may be the only element not shared by poems and by typical advertisements. At the other extreme, the graphics level may be crucial to the *meaning* of the poem. The poems of George Herbert frequently took the shape of a physical object that was the poem's subject; his poem "Easter-Wings" is in the shape of a pair of wings. A science fiction poem might take the shape of a rocket, or a dragon, or a sorrowful bacterium, and that shape would then be crucial to its meaning. Writing a science fiction poem that was about a rocket, while arranging its graphic shape to form the picture of a dragon, would allow a poet to include in the poem's meaning the proposition that a rocket is like a dragon—without one word appearing in the poem to actually say that. In such a case, changing the graphic form of the poem would mean the total loss of part of its content.

Line length in prose, like punctuation and capitalization in prose, is a cut-and-dried matter about which the writer usually has little choice.

When a prose line is shorter than the full width from margin to margin it's because it has fewer characters in it than the space allows. With poems, however, the point at which a line will begin or end is a matter of the poet's free choice, and there are formally as many potential arrangements as can be fit into the physical limits of the page. Readers must therefore assume that when a poet arranges lines in a certain way, or punctuates or capitalizes lines in a certain way, it's done for a reason, whether that reason can be consciously explained or not. Please look at this example of a simple four-line verse, constructed by me for this handbook:

> Terra was once a paradise
> hung in the sky;
> but now it is a poisoned waste
> where all things die.

Now let's compare that plain-vanilla version with some possible graphics variations:

> (1)
>
> Terra was once
> a paradise hung in the sky;
> but now it is a poisoned
> waste where all things die.
>
> (2)
>
> Terra was once a paradise hung in the sky;
> but now it is a poisoned waste where all things die.

(3)

Terra was
once
a paradise hung in the sky;
but now it is a
poisoned waste
where all things
die.

The question is, does it matter which of the arrangements is chosen when the poem is printed? Since this isn't a case in which the poem's shape forms a picture of a specific object, does its shape matter?

It does matter, yes. If you read the four arrangements aloud (something you should always do when you write a poem), you'll find that they sound very different. Variations (1) and (3) change the rhythm of the poem drastically. Arrangement (2) can be read to sound like the original, but it creates a visual problem: Only the original version allows the poet to use both sound and visual form to place strong emphasis on the two phrases "paradise" and "poisoned waste," contrasting them in both the reader's eye and the reader's ear. With arrangement (2) that *may* happen, but the original allows the poet to help it happen. Such things matter; they are essential parts of the poem. They matter just as much in what is usually called "free verse" as they do in the most rigid traditional forms; they are part of the resources available to the poet for making the poem.

When an editor changes the way a poem's lines are arranged (perhaps to make it fit more easily into some available empty space), the result is a different poem. It may be as good as the original, or even better than the original, but it will not be the poem that the poet wrote and entrusted to the editor. That change should never happen without the poet's agreement.

Do Poets Know What They're Doing?

I'm often asked (as a linguist) whether poets know what they are doing, graphically speaking, and whether they deliberately intend for the reader to notice. When a poem makes a picture, that's obviously intentional, but what about the more usual situation? B.F. Skinner claims that poets have *no* idea what they're doing; I strongly disagree.

To discuss this sensibly, let's use the two linguistics terms, *competence*

and *performance*. Competence refers to the theoretically flawless knowledge that speakers have of their native tongue and dialect; performance refers to what happens in the real world when they *use* that knowledge. Theoretically, you would never make a mistake of any kind when you speak or write your native tongue, and the fact that you reliably reject unacceptable sequences of your language (such as "boy the tree big climbed") proves that you know the rules involved. But in the real world people do make mistakes, all the time, and they are ordinarily not able to explain what rules they are following or violating. Such knowledge is not part of their conscious awareness. Suppose you are asked to provide the rule for forming an English yes/no question. You probably won't be able to do that —but the fact that you form English yes/no questions correctly every day proves that you know the rule or rules involved. Even if you can't explain what you are doing; even if you aren't consciously aware that you're doing it.

In the same way, poets theoretically have flawless control of the system of poetic language that is native to them. But in the real world they may fall far short—in performance terms—of demonstrating that control, or being able to explain it, or even being aware of it. *This does not invalidate their poetic competence*. Poets may not be able to explain why the line breaks in their work must fall where they do; but the fact that they would immediately reject other arrangements as incorrect demonstrates that the choice is not being made at random, or in order to fit the poem into a particular space on the page.

Many people (and editors) who are willing to grant all of this don't appear to realize that it's just as true of the poet's punctuation. Certainly it may happen that the only reason a poet puts a dash where a comma would be required in prose is that the poet doesn't know how to use the dash properly, but it's never safe to make that assumption without evidence. Publishers and editors were forever "correcting" the punctuation that Emily Dickinson used, on the assumption that she did what she did through carelessness or ignorance; only recently have they begun to issue her poems with her own punctuation, so that readers finally have an opportunity to see and to hear what she meant.

It is the poet's privilege to introduce deviance into the graphics of the poem—to omit all capital letters, to scramble spelling, to put punctuation marks into the middle of words. A device I'm very fond of is the use of curly braces, as in this line:

and Terra $\left\{\begin{matrix}\text{wrapped}\\ \text{rapt}\end{matrix}\right\}$ in endless light

I think it's reasonable to say that science fiction readers will know that curly braces mean "choose one from this set," and I use them deliberately; when an editor replaces my curly brackets with square ones, which do not mean "choose one," I am very irritated. Poets are entitled to the assumption that the deviance they introduce matters and is done for a reason, even if they cannot readily explain that reason. How good at this the poet may be is a matter of performance, not competence, as is the poetry reader's skill at interpreting the result.

It's inevitable that the distance between competence and performance will be greater in poetry than in prose, because so much more deviance is allowed; this is one reason why having the poem written down is so helpful. The reader has the opportunity to go over the poem many times, in an attempt to better the odds that performance and competence will be more nearly equivalent.

If you want to use unusual graphics devices that introduce large elements of deviance into your work, that's your privilege. But you will want to keep in mind that the more your work deviates from the conventions of prose or the conventions of more traditional poetry, the greater the chances are that the reader won't understand what you're saying. If that matters to you, you'll make an effort to use other mechanisms of poetic language to reinforce your meaning, and to offset the potential loss of clarity that the graphics deviance brings with it. You may not care—poet Paul Valéry claimed not to care, and said that he wrote for "the happy few"—but it should be a decision you make as a poet. It shouldn't be something that simply *happens* to you.

The market for science fiction poetry at the time this handbook is being written (in early 2004) is not as large or as strong as poets would like it to be, and many editors are very conservative. If your experiments with graphic arrangements go very far, you will probably have a harder time getting your poems published; if that matters to you, you will want to remember it when you make decisions about graphics. The market for "speculative" poetry—not clearly identifiable as science fiction, fantasy, or horror, and including straight science poems—is larger. You can send speculative poetry to almost any poetry journal, including those considered mainstream. However, remember that if your poetry doesn't appear in science fiction/fantasy/horror markets, you will have difficulty establishing recognition for yourself *as* a science fiction poet.

* * *

Writing Poetry In Traditional Forms

The last topic I want to discuss in this chapter is that of choosing to write poems in traditional set forms such as the sonnet or the haiku (referred to in the science fiction community as the *scifaiku)*, or in some new set form that you yourself invent. You might decide to write a scifaiku; in that case, you have to write three lines, with five syllables in the first and third line and seven in the second. Or you might decide to write poems in a form of your own devising that has eleven lines, with twenty-one syllables in the first line, nineteen in the second, seventeen in the third, and so on by odd numbers down to just one syllable in the final line. I like to write in the French poetry form called the chantefable, which uses both rhymed-and-metered sections and prose-poem sections.

The choice of any set form brings with it certain graphics constraints. It still leaves you free to vary punctuation and spelling and capitalization, but it tends to place firm limits on line length and arrangement. It's difficult to imagine how a haiku could be written that would form a picture of a dragon—the form selected rules out that possibility in advance. The invented eleven-line form is almost certainly going to be shaped like a triangle; that constraint is imposed on it by the rules of the form.

Suppose that you make this rule for yourself: Every poem I write must form the shape of some concrete object. That would be less work today, when you have computers available to help you, than it would have been twenty years ago. It would be novel enough in science fiction poetry to sell poems, and you might develop a strong reputation as the poet who does that. But it would severely limit your options at the graphics level. I suspect that you'd get awfully tired of the limitations, just as you might get tired of writing only sonnets. Your goal should be to make reasoned choices among the many possible forms.

Suppose you want to write a science fiction poem with the message "There is a universe in which bacteria grieve when other bacteria are killed by antibiotics." You are free to write it as a sonnet, as "free verse," as a prose poem, as a form of your own invention, or in many other ways; that's entirely up to you. But there will be consequences for your poem resulting from each choice. It's not trivial or irrelevant. It matters in terms of the effect the poem has on the reader; it matters in terms of the markets that will be available for the poem; it matters in terms of the degree of freedom you will have as you write.

I would suggest that as an exercise you choose some message (the one about bacteria will do if you don't have anything in mind) and try writ-

ing it in a number of different strict forms. Then look at the results and consider what the differences are, and why. You do this not just for practice, or for the fun of solving the puzzles it sets for you as a poet, but because it's one very good way to bring the knowledge that you have about what you are doing to a level of consciousness that will allow you to use that knowledge *systematically*. It gives you control of what you know. For the same reason, and to achieve the same goal, take one of your own poems and write it with many different kinds of graphic deviance. Vary the punctuation, the capitalization, the line breaks, the type style—then consider carefully how the resulting poems differ from one another, and why.

My favorite source for definitions and examples of specific poetic forms is Babette Deutsch's *Poetry Handbook: A Dictionary of Terms*; but there are many such handbooks available, and any of them will tell you such things as how many lines a sonnet has or what the rhyme scheme is for a rondeau. At the present time no such manual exists for science fiction (or even speculative) poetry, but that's irrelevant for your present purposes. Take the example of the poetic form that appears in the manual you are using, and rewrite it as a science fiction poem; write it out by hand, so that your body gets a feel for the form and you aren't forced to rely on a memorized definition.

The example Deutsch gives for a haiku in my copy of her handbook is this translation of one by the sixteenth-century poet Moritaki:

> "The falling flower
> I saw drift back to the branch
> Was a butterfly"

I can take a look at this, think to myself that substituting "unicorn" for "butterfly" will turn it into a science fiction haiku, and go no farther, but I won't learn much that way. I need to write it out and make that substitution, over-simplified as it is, in order to experience what it feels like to write a haiku. I need to write it out with no capital letters, and look at it carefully, and see if that seems to make any difference. And then I need to try to determine why I think so.

The more you know about what you're doing as a poet, the more likely you are to have what you write respected and accepted as being "correct" just the way you have written it. And the less likely you are to be told by editors that they will print your poems only if you make changes in them. Editors, and readers, are also capable of recognizing and respecting competence reflected in performance.

Chapter Three
Phonological Patterning: How the Poem Sounds

Patterning at the phonological level of poetic language (the level of the sound system) is the first thing we appreciate about it. Long before a child is old enough to do more than babble, it will respond to such immortal sequences as "pattycake, pattycake, baker's man!" The child doesn't tell us that this sequence has a compelling rhythm. It doesn't remark on the fascinating fact that "pattycake, pattycake" runs through the set of English voiceless stop consonants (P, T, K,) from the front of the mouth to the back of the mouth twice, or that it has a duplicated pattern of interesting vowels. The child doesn't mention to us that "Baker's man!" repeats the vowel pattern again in reverse. But the child notices these patterns and responds to them with delight. The consonants "P, T, K" are a natural class of English sounds (that is, things that happen to one of the set are likely to happen to all of them); and the child, busily engaged in learning the English sound system, is constantly observing such things. The pleasure found in sound patterns continues through life, although we may outgrow our appreciation for nursery rhymes.

The meaningful sounds of a language are called phonemes; "P, T, K" are phonemes of English, and are usually written between two slashes to indicate that status. In ordinary language certain phonemes occur more frequently than others, as certain letters occur more frequently than others. The phoneme /zh/ (the sound of "s" in "pleasure") occurs much more rarely in English than the phoneme /m/ represented by the letter "m" in "metrics." But these frequencies are built into the structure of the language; we don't, when we talk, make deliberate choices among the phonemes in an attempt to establish patterns of sound. Suppose I'm eating dinner with you and I say "Pass the peas, please." The sequence has four monosyllables, three of which begin with the same consonant phoneme and the last two of which rhyme. We can safely assume I

didn't use that sound patterning on purpose. In a poem, however, we would assume that this same pattern was deliberately intended.

The most basic device of sound patterning in English poetry is rhyme, with its subcategories, including alliteration, assonance, and consonance. Rhyme is the repetition of sounds. Alliteration is the repetition of word-initial sounds (usually the first consonant or consonant cluster) as in "tree, try, trail, trifle." Assonance is the repetition of stressed vowels, as in "rain, gain, mail, strange, flake"; consonance is the repetition of final consonant sounds, as in "ledge, judge, bridge, fringe." All of these devices work together in poetry to provide sound patterns, potentially patterns of great intricacy.

In *perfect* rhyme (the most familiar kind, and the usual sense in which the term "rhyme" is used) the first sounds in the rhymed words are different, but the other sounds match; tired pairs like "love/dove" and "moon/June" are perfect rhymes. Spelling often has little to do with this system—except for "eye rhyme," which is a special device based on the fact that a set of words may match for the eye even when they don't match for the ear, as with the pair "rough/bough." It's the phonemes of the language that are involved in rhyme, not the letters; eye-rhyme is therefore a device from the level of graphics.

Example and Analysis

Here is an example of a science fiction poem, with a brief analysis of some of its sound patterns, to make this more clear.

> "Emerson has written that the poet is the only true doctor. I believe him, for the poet, lacking the impediment of speech with which the rest of us are afflicted, gazes, records, diagnoses, and prophesies."
>
> (Richard Selzer, *Mortal Lessons*, page 16)
>
> You will be pleased to know:
>
> Today we have therapists to provide
> the blessed impediment—the tongue, tied,
> the nerves laced decently, and laced inside.
> Today we find them early, diapered, nested,
> before their brains are hopelessly infested
> with images; today, they can be tested,
> the diagnosis made, the remedy applied,
> before the poison spreads. Our pride is justified …
> poetry was a slow and agonizing suicide.
> No more those gouts of wet and living rose.
> Now we apply the tourniquet of prose
> and staunch the torturing truth before it flows.

This poem has a very simple rhyme scheme; it uses four groups of three lines, with each group of three ending in perfect rhymes. The first and third groups use the same perfect rhyme ("eyed"), while the second and fourth groups have different perfect rhymes ("ested" and "oze").

You have to be careful with perfect rhymes because so many of them are trite; one way to avoid sounding like a bad greeting card is to limit your use of perfect rhymes that are one-syllable words like "love/dove." (Unless of course you can come up with sets of such words that are truly original and splendid, in which case you should go right ahead.)

I ended the example poem above with three familiar perfect rhymes: "rose, prose, flows." But I did several things—deliberately— in an effort to keep them from being perceived as trite.

1. I made sure that of the remaining nine perfect rhymes there were eight that had two or more syllables.

2. I placed the only other one-syllable rhyme very early in the poem, at a

distance from the triple set at the end.

3. I put the "rose, prose, flows" set at the end of lines that use those words in an unusual way. "Prose," for example, does not stand alone but is part of the phrase "the tourniquet of prose," and that's not a cliché. There's nothing original about either the concept of "truth that flows" or "gouts of rose"; however, they occur here as part of a hypothetical surgical procedure performed on all infant poets to cure them of the dangerous illness called poetry, and that is sufficiently novel to lessen the potential for triteness.

I deliberately made the poem difficult to pronounce; it's stuffed with consonants that clash and cluster and demand gymnastics of the vocal tract. I did that because I wanted to reinforce the concept of poetry as a sort of "speech disorder" requiring urgent therapy. It backs up the word "impediment" in the second line, next to "the tongue, tied," both intended to make the reader think of speech impediments and being "tongue-tied" without having to say so flat out. (Richard Selzer's use of "impediment of speech" in the quotation that is the poem's epigraph helped me considerably.) There are numerous examples of the consonant clusters "ts," "st," and "sts" ("therapists, laced, gouts, staunch") and an additional set where the cluster appears only for the eye ("nested, infested, tested, justified"). "Therapists" is a word that— like "desks, wasps, fifths"—forces the speaker to do violence to the sound system rules of English; it's hard to say. In ordinary speech we deal with a sequence like "therapists to" by saying "therapis to"; we don't pronounce the final "ts" in "therapists" if it comes before a word beginning with another consonant. The sequence "laced decently" is similarly hard to say, and the sequence "laced inside" contains a hidden "st" between the two words. That whole opening three-line group is deliberately intended to be reminiscent of tongue-twisters and to produce a "speech impediment" for the reader. Through the whole poem I relied heavily on two sets of consonants: the English stops /p, t, k, b, d, g/, so called because to produce them you have to stop the flow of air through the vocal tract; and the English fricatives /th, f, v, s, z, ch, j, sh, zh/, so called because they literally produce turbulence of sound by the friction in their pronunciation.

I did all this because I wanted the poem to be an illustration of its subject—poetry as speech disorder and speech impediment—and the stops and fricatives of English require more effort to pronounce than the other English sounds, especially when used in quantity. I also did it

because the word "stop" reinforces the ideas in "impediment, tourniquet, staunch, laced" and because the word "fricative" names those sounds of English characterized by their noisiness … their hissing and buzzing. This is special knowledge, in the sense that I can't expect every reader to know about the linguistics terms "stop" and "fricative"; but it is a kind of special knowledge that I can use without it being a barrier to understanding, and it's part of the science component of the poem. If that chunk of meaning is picked up, it helps; if it's missed, it does no harm.

With all that said, I must also say that it was a mistake for me to do this, and pretentious, and self-indulgent. Poetry should be made pleasant to read aloud; it should feel good in the mouth. I was showing off, being clever at the expense of the reader or listener, in Valéry fashion. But that's not the point. The point is that, contrary to Skinner's claim, none of the things I did was an accident.

For the vowels, I bore down hard on the "eye" sound; it carries six of the perfect rhymes and appears also in "fine, diapered, diagnosis, pride, agonizing, apply." "Pride" is another perfect rhyme in the set used for stanzas one and three; put inside the line as it is, it's called "internal rhyme." I did this because that sound is the sound of "cry" and it is the vowel of cries and of pain; this poem is about surgery, which inevitably means pain. I also backed up the "crying" with "diapered," which brings in babies, who inevitably cry. Then in the final group of lines I switched to another group of vowels I associate with pain: the "ow" of "gouts" and the "oh" of the end rhymes. And all through the poem there are lots of "i" and "o" letters for the eye to see, to reinforce the pain sounds for the ear. If I did this right, the poem hisses and moans and cries in its totality of sound, and that is what I wanted. I wanted sound patterns that would make readers hear "Oh! Ai! Ow! Sssssssss! Ouch!" somewhere in the backs of their minds.

Counting up how many times particular sounds and/or letters are used in a poem won't always tell you anything about a poet's intentions. You have to take into account how frequently particular sounds and letters are used in that language in ordinary speech. A poem may contain a lot of examples of the letter "e" or the phoneme /t/ just because English, as English, uses those two items so often. But poets are entitled to the benefit of a doubt. Unless there's evidence to the contrary, it's fair to assume that when sounds (and letters to symbolize and/or reinforce the sounds) are frequent in a poem, the poet has done that deliberately and for good reasons. Sometimes the poet will be around to confirm the assumption, as I am in this instance, but even without the confirmation

readers should be willing to grant the poet that intention. It's the sort of thing that poets know how to do.

The Word Palette

There are many poets who achieve deliberate effects of sound "unconsciously"—that is, they rely on inspiration and their poetic competence, and it works. I'm not one of the lucky ones who can get by that way, unfortunately. That makes me a less impressive poet, no question about that, but it does have one good feature: It makes it possible for me to provide an explanation for what I've done. This may be useful for other people for whom just "the Muse" or "because it sounded right to me" aren't enough.

The technique I use to do this isn't my own, and I can therefore recommend it without being hampered by modesty. I learned it from reading Paul Valéry, where he explains how it is done, and from reading his poems and looking at reproductions of his manuscripts where the technique can be observed.

Valéry would set up what he called a "word palette" for a poem. First he would write down key words that were related (in meaning or by association) to the ideas he wanted to express, until he had large groups to choose from. And then as he wrote the poem he would select from the word palette those words within each group that fit the sound pattern he was after, the way a painter selects shades of color. I almost always do this before I write a poem, and have done it long enough now that the patterns almost leap out at me; I could not possibly do it "unconsciously," but I admire those who can.

The key words I started with for "Brochure … " were "speech impediment, surgery, agony, poetry, prose." The quotation, with its phrase "impediment of speech" (attributed by Selzer to non-poets), gave me the idea for the poem in the first place; Selzer is a surgeon, and his book *Mortal Lessons* is a collection of essays (extraordinarily poetic essays) about surgery. When I began I had the pair "surgery" and "agony" set up to be obvious rhymes; before I got through with the poem, "agony" had been folded into "agonizing," where it wasn't quite so obvious, and I had set up "surgery" as a phantom constituent. (I'll come back to the phantom constituent in Chapter Five; for now, just think of it as a word or sequence of words that never appears overtly in the poem but that should occur inescapably in the mind of the reader.) Establishing phantom constituents is one of my favorite techniques in poetry, and much

of that work can be done by sound patterning.

You'll notice that although of the three words "poetry, agony, surgery" only "poetry" appears in the poem, the others are reinforced by words with the same melodic pattern; "decently, hopelessly, remedy" and "poetry" itself echo them. One of the ways our brain stores words is by these melodic (intonational) patterns, and the poet can make use of that resource.

I recommend the word palette technique if you, like me, have to struggle to get a poem going properly. It worked magnificently for Valéry, and it has served me well for more than fifty years. (A dictionary and thesaurus will help.)

Metric Patterns

Patterns of rhythm—called metric patterns, or meters—are independent of the sounds used to fill them. In instrumental music the rhythmic patterns depend on pure tones without a single phoneme attached. Meter ought to be a joy for us, as it is to the child reveling in the nursery rhymes; certainly we rejoice in rhythmic patterns in almost every other activity of our lives.

Unfortunately, the manner in which most of us have been taught about meter has taught us only to hate it; the traditional lessons in "metrics" use a system and a vocabulary that were just fine for Latin and Greek but that work abominably for English. Remember having to memorize "iambic pentameter" and being required to make chicken scratches under lines of poetry to indicate that an "iambic pentameter line" went "da DA da DA da DA da DA da DA"? That experience, and its various refinements, have caused much of the English-speaking population to detest everything even remotely connected to meter and metrics.

If you'd like to read about the traditional systems and learn all their terms and principles, you'll find whole shelves of books devoted to them in the libraries and on the Internet, and I cheerfully refer you to those materials. I don't plan to try to duplicate them here, even in summary. Instead I want to describe another way to look at English meter that I find useful, based on the work of linguists Samuel Keyser, Morris Halle, and Joseph Beaver. I'll go through the basics here, and you will find ample material elsewhere to take you beyond them.

1. The most basic unit of meter for English is called a FOOT, and is composed of two syllables.

2. A LINE of verse is made up of one or more FEET.

3. In English metered verse, a line will contain no more than five feet—because longer groups are perceived by the human ear as *multiples* of one to five feet.

4. For English the basic unit of metric stress is the STRESS MAXIMUM, which is a syllable that has a more weakly stressed syllable on both sides of it, like the second syllable of the word "November." (This means that neither the first nor the last syllable of any line can ever be a stress maximum.)

5. The more stress maximums (often called "stress maxima") there are in any line, the more intense and obvious the line's metric pattern will be.

6. English has only two basic metric stress patterns: STRESS RIGHT, as in the word "Shazam!"; and STRESS LEFT, as in the word "Neptune."

Poets are allowed to take this basic system and add variety to it in a number of ways; we'll look at some of the most common ones below. In the examples, the metric feet are marked off by slashes; the symbol "S" indicates a more strongly stressed syllable; the symbol "W" indicates a more weakly stressed one; an S in brackets indicates a stress maximum; and a null sign (∅) indicates a syllable slot that has been left empty.

A line that follows the rules without variation looks like this:

/ Ve- nus / ris- ing / o- ver / hill- sides /
S W [S] W [S] W [S] W

This line has four metric feet, and contains three stress maximums; no line with four feet could ever have more than three stress maximums, so it has made the pattern as emphatic as it's possible to make it. (For miles and miles of this pattern, go to Longfellow's "Hiawatha.") Because the ear gets weary if that sort of theoretical perfection goes on too long in practice, variations are allowed. For example …

1. You can leave a syllable slot in a line empty.

/Ve- nus / ris- ing / in the / east ∅ /
S W [S] W [S] W S

Here there are still four feet in the line, but in the final foot one syllable slot is unfilled. This doesn't delete the time that a syllable would take if it were there—the empty slot is like a "rest" in music. The line is less intense metrically than the preceding example because it has only two stress maximums for four metric feet; although "east" is a strong syllable it's not a stress maximum, because it doesn't have a weak syllable on both sides.

2. You can add an extra *weak* syllable to a foot.

Ju- pi- ter / o- ver the / wil- der- ness /
S W W [S] W W [S] W W

This line has three metric feet, with an extra weak syllable added to each one; a foot with this pattern is perceived by the human ear as occupying the same amount of time as the basic S-W or W-S foot.

3. You can fill an entire metric foot with one very strongly stressed syllable.

/ Trolls! / Gnomes! / Orcs! / Elves! /
S S S S

This is a bit tricky, and it can fail you; you'll notice that it doesn't have any stress maximums to guide the ear at all. If it works, it works because the English-speaking reader perceives "Trolls!" as lasting just as long as "Venus" or "Beware!", and can be counted on not to read the line as having two metric feet stressed like this:

a. / Trolls! Gnomes! / Orcs! Elves! /
S W S W

or …

b. / Trolls! Gnomes! / Orcs! Elves! /
W S W S

It won't work if you try it using one-syllable words that can't carry a strong stress all by themselves; for example, you couldn't turn the phrase "the gnomes" into two metric feet because "the" is too weak to carry a

full stress. It usually works best if it occurs inside a sequence of lines that have already established a pattern of four feet to the line, so that the reader is expecting that to continue.

4. You can reverse the pattern in one metric foot of your line.

/ Wom- bats / and loons / in moats / and bogs /
S W W [S] W [S] W S

Here the pattern of the line is four feet with a weak syllable followed by a strong one, but in the first foot you've used S-W instead of W-S, for variety's sake. This gives you four metric feet, but only two stress maximums instead of the more typical three, and can be a great relief to the ear. It's traditionally called "irregular," or an exception, but that's not really necessary; we don't call a musical variation an irregularity or an exception.

The rules of English phonology that permit more elaborate variations and cause the ear to hear them as taking the same amount of perceived time as the basic S-W and W-S sequences are of interest only to the specialist. A typical rule says that two syllables count as one syllable (that is, they are perceived as taking only one syllable's worth of time) if they are separated by only "m, n, ng, l, r." This means that "in a tree" is perceived as taking roughly the same amount of time as "the tree" because the vowel of "in" and the vowel of "a" are separated only by the "n" sound of "in." If you didn't speak English you'd have to memorize all such rules, which would be a nuisance; as an English speaker, however, you can trust your ear to recognize a metric foot whether you are consciously aware of the rules it follows or not.

To test your lines for meter that works—meter that "scans," your editor will say—assume that you are holding a mug of your favorite beverage in one hand and swinging it in time to the lines you're reading. Then follow this principle:

Every swing of the mug marks off one metric foot.

If any two of your lines are supposed to match metrically, but when you read them aloud and swing your hypothetical mug you don't get the same number of swings for each line, those lines do not scan.

This matters—because lines that don't scan result in poems that editors reject, and that readers and listeners have to struggle with. Making sure that your lines scan is so easy that it's hard for editors to understand why the poet can't be bothered to do it properly; it makes a very bad im-

pression.

Example and Analysis

These two verses of a science fiction poem (titled "The Seas of Space" (singable to the tune of "The Water Is Wide") will serve as an example for analysis, with the meter marked in the symbols we've been using.

/ Oh, come / and sail / the seas / of space /
W [S] W [S] W [S] W S

/ that have / no shores, / and their waves / are light / ;
W [S] W [S] W [S] W S

/ come sail / with me—/ be my con- / -stant friend /
W [S] W [S] W [S] W S

/ on the jour- / -ney out / that has / no end. /
W [S] W [S] W [S] W S

/ I'll show / you won- / -ders on ev- / -ery hand /
W [S] W [S] W [S] W S

/ you'll nev- / -er see / on an- / -y land /,
W [S] W [S] W [S] W S

/ and Ter- / -ra {wrapped / rapt} / in end / -less light /
W [S] W [S] W [S] W S

/ and wound / a- round / in blue / and white/.
W [S] W [S] W [S] W S

In the second line the sequence "and their" counts as one weak syllable, as do "be my" in the third line and "on the" in the fourth. The second syllable of "wonders" in line five, plus "on," counts as a single weak syllable; and although I didn't spell "every" in the old poetic style, "ev'ry," that is the way it will sound. I deliberately filled every line with the three

stress maximums that are all four feet can hold, which makes the meter insistent and powerful; if it went on like that for very long, it would also make it boring.

Metrics In Free Verse

Now we come to a part of metrics that isn't hard just because it's been taught in a way that makes reasonable people hate it, but because it isn't well understood: the question of rhythmic patterns in so called "free" verse. I've had students who considered traditional meter to be The Hard Part, and I agree with them that free verse *looks* easier. In free verse you don't often have the problem of being unable to use some otherwise perfect word in a line because it won't fit the pattern. But if you are trying to teach poetics, the problem of explaining free verse rhythms is a substantial one.

If you're willing to tell your students something like, "There's no way to explain it, you just have to develop an ear for it," the problem disappears. But I can't get away with that, since I am convinced that when I set up rhythms in my poetry I do it deliberately and systematically, and I think other poets do the same. If it's being done systematically, the system has to be based on principles and rules; if I'm being paid to explain it, I am obligated to do my best to present those principles and rules. I don't find that easy, and I think the term "free verse" is very misleading for English. I will use it here because it's the one that's customary, but I use it with the understanding that I don't find it all that "free."

In free verse the metric unit is not the foot but the *cadence*. Deutsch defines "cadence" as "a rhythmical unit, similar to a musical phrase, which, when recurring, gives symmetry to verse where a strict metrical pattern is wanting." She says cadences are "phrases which fall into the symmetrical or nearly symmetrical pattern observed when speech rhythm is highly organized" and refers once again to the similarity between cadences in language and phrases in music. I couldn't improve on her definitions, but they rely on the reader to have a solid grasp of what a musical phrase is. And even if "musical phrase" and "symmetry" are clear to the beginning poet, there's still a need for some sort of instructions on putting them to use in actual poems. Talking of cadences as "breath groups" is common, and equally mysterious. Whose breath group? In what context? Breathing how fast and how often? And how do you figure out how breath groups are constructed and assembled?

One way to learn about using cadences is to turn to the works of po-

ets who use them not only extremely well but also obviously. Read a good number of their poems aloud for the benefit of the ear, and write out a good number of their poems in longhand for the benefit of the whole body, to "get a feel for" cadence. I recommend the poems of Theodore Roethke, Robert Bly, David Waggoner, and Marge Piercy for this, for starters.

Example and Analysis

Here is a science fiction poem analyzed for cadence, as an example.

Moses, Emily Post, and the Empath: First Installment

The etiquette of the flesh is truly stringent,
but it varies, as does comeliness, from house to house;
that which they teach the children at one table
brings down the whip next door;
humans are like that.
The etiquette of the mind is universal,
but the answer to almost every question is, forever,
NO.
For example:
THOU SHALT NOT TOUCH ANOTHER'S MIND UNASKED.
No matter how great the need.
Those who do are said to be "undiapered of mind";
The barriers set against their Touchings scald them,
until they learn.

(We will return
with another stone.)

As an example of my reasons for thinking that I do what I do based upon rules, whether I can express them consciously or not, consider that line beginning "THOU SHALT NOT …". I would unhesitatingly reject "THOU SHALT NOT TOUCH ANOTHER'S MIND UNINVITED" as just plain wrong, in the same way that I would unhesitatingly reject a line of traditional metered verse that doesn't scan, or a sequence of a poem that read "Dragon the flew forth hill from the." That kind of rejection means there is a rule involved. If this were truly "free" verse, "uninvited" would do just as well as "unasked"—it is in fact a more ac-

curate lexicalization of the chunk of meaning I was trying to give a surface shape to than "unasked" is.

Within a musical composition there are phrases of many sizes, inside which you can identify smaller phrases. The melody to "Silent Night" starts with the phrase that goes with the words "silent night" and repeats it with "holy night." The notes that go with "all is calm" make up a phrase that is repeated with "all is bright." And so on. If we analyze the example poem in that way, we can find at least these three cadence groups:

GROUP ONE:
The etiquette of the flesh; brings down the whip next door; the etiquette of the mind; no matter how great the need; that which they teach the children

GROUP TWO:
First Installment; is truly stringent; but it varies; from house to house; at one table; bring down the whip; humans are like that; is universal; for example; until they learn; we will return; with another stone

GROUP THREE:
Thou shalt not touch another's mind unasked; the barriers set against their Touchings scald them; it varies, as does comeliness, from house to house; the answer to almost every question is, forever; the etiquette of the flesh is truly stringent; the etiquette of the mind is universal; Moses, Emily Post, and the Empath

There are subcadences and sub-subcadences as well, but this is enough analysis to demonstrate the process. I set up these groups deliberately when I wrote the poem, and I can therefore tell you that for me each member of a set of cadences listed is perceived as *taking up the same amount of time* as all the others. If I were to read the poem aloud I would read it so that that was essentially what happened. I say "essentially" because there are variations, but those variations are systematic. Think of "Silent Night" again.… Suppose a performer sang the first phrase, "silent night," and followed it with "holy night" sung more slowly. The second performance of the phrase would take longer in real time, but you would still recognize it as the same phrase that went with "silent night"—because the internal time relationships are preserved. That is, the pattern of the rhythm is the same, even if its tempo changes. The same thing is true for language, so that although a particular cadence

may take more time than another in real-time units, that won't keep you from recognizing the two as identical in rhythm if the internal relationship of one syllable to another is kept stable.

Some parts of English cadences are not under the control of the poet but are imposed by the language. If I use "remember" in a cadence, I'm stuck with the fact that the second syllable is more strongly stressed than the first and the last, and there's nothing I can do about that. If I decide that I want to try using "remember" and "the gate" and "Trolls!" as a set of three matching cadences, forcing that pattern on the reader by working those words into a pattern that can be read no other way, I had better be awfully good at what I do, because the words themselves will fight that. If I want to put "remember" into a set of cadences based on the pattern of "three blind mice" I have to find a way to force the reader to read "remember" as if it were "ree mem burr," and that's not going to be easy. Gerard Manley Hopkins tried to do things like that by using special punctuation to show how the words were to be read. I don't think it worked very well; his poems are like the written music for blues—just an approximation of what he intended—and that puts a barrier between him and his readers. But punctuation is one of the few tools you have to work with in setting up your cadences.

When I wrote "Moses, Emily … " I wanted that one word "No" to take up as much perceived time as "for example" and "forever." I couldn't count on that, and still can't. I did my best to indicate that that was what I wanted by putting "forever" on one side of it and "for example" on the other, by putting "no" on a line by itself with a period after it, and by writing "no" all in capital letters. That increases the odds of my getting what I wanted, but it doesn't guarantee it, and words all in caps are irritating to the eye. Someone may still read that "no" as if it were just the last word of the preceding line in lower case letters, and that will change the poem. That is a penalty the poet pays for the "freedom" from metric rules that comes with free verse.

My own practice with cadences comes from the old King James Bible, hammered into me much of my life, and from Theodore Roethke. I learned by writing out (in longhand) poems by Roethke, and big chunks of Job and Ecclesiastes, and analyzing them for their cadences. I don't know any better or easier way to do that, but there are lots of other choices to serve as your models.

One of the things most likely to cause a writer's prose to be referred to as "poetic" is an obvious and consistent use of cadence. John Steinbeck is a good example; the patterns in his prose are so clear that his books could often be written as verse as easily as they've been written as

prose. The style isn't fashionable at the moment (although it's more fashionable in science fiction than in mainstream fiction), but it's worth studying if you're trying to get a firm grip on cadence.

Marketing Note

People (including editors) tend to have a strong preference for or against traditional forms of poetry. Commercially distributed science fiction and fantasy magazines will often accept a rhymed and metered poem (especially a sonnet or a limerick) that they wouldn't accept if it were done as free verse on the same subject. If you're trying to break into these markets you're somewhat more likely to accomplish it with rhymed and metered work. Conversely, the "literary" poetry journals, both mainstream and speculative, tend to reject rhymed and/or metered verse as too traditional unless it is extremely good. According to poet and editor Mike Allen, "Free verse is the dominant form, and is usually the better bet." However, I believe that if there is such a thing as "the most marketable poetic form of all" it is the really well done rhymed sonnet with dense sound patterns and no clichés, and that is as true in science fiction as anywhere else.

Chapter Four
Lexical Patterning: How Poets Choose Their Words

We've now come to a part of the system of poetic language where the science fiction poet—at last!—has a marked advantage over the "mainstream" poet. So far as I know, only in science fiction poetry can poets who find themselves without some word they hanker for just make one up on the spot. Mainstream poets who try that may get away with it if it's done exceedingly well, but they do it in the full awareness that it's a risk, and it's not something available to them as a frequent and abundant resource. For the science fiction poet, risk occurs only when insufficient information is given to let the reader figure out what the invented word means. Even then, it may not be a disadvantage, because science fiction readers often enjoy the mysterious and the enigmatic.

The lexical level of language is roughly the level of word choice, of vocabulary. The term "word" isn't quite precise enough, though; we also need "morpheme," which is the term for any part of a word having an independent meaning. The word "unpleasant" has two morphemes—the negative morpheme "un-" and the morpheme "pleasant" to which it is attached; only "pleasant" is both a morpheme and a word. We also need "neologism," the technical term for an invented word, and "lexicalization," which is the name for the process of giving a particular chunk of meaning a pronounceable (or writable or signable) surface shape as a word or morpheme.

Neologizing—Constructing New Lexical Items

Lexical deviance is one of the resources a poet has for making the language of the poem novel and interesting to the reader. It can be an extremely simple violation of a morphology rule, such as adding the "un-" morpheme to a word that doesn't allow that in ordinary language. (For example, titling a poem "The Unmoon.") It can be complex, as with Lewis Carroll's "all mimsy were the borogroves," but with all the lexical items still recognizable as possible morphemes of the language, with functions that can be figured out from the context. And it can be a violation so extreme that all it retains of the morphology is the letters, as in the work of Michael McClure. I don't have permission to quote from McClure, but I can construct an example of the sort of thing you'd find if I did, like this:

"HRRaggghhoobrr grovreeeeegh rrRRRRrrrr 00000000 krooophgh!"

When you go as far as McClure does, you risk losing your audience altogether; be sure that you are taking that risk because you *choose* to.

Some neologisms are *productive*. That is, they are the result of a systematic process that can be expanded to construct a whole set of forms made to the same pattern. I once wrote a mediocre line (in an even more mediocre poem) that went, "see this city cezanned by day," where "cezanned" was an invented verb based on the name of the Impressionist painter Paul Cézanne. Anyone familiar with the work of Cézanne could easily imagine how a "cezanned" city would look, and that was handy. The word set out a pattern for a productive rule that anyone could use to produce lines like "at dawn the city seemed picassoed" or "the michaelangeloed village shone in the sun" or "tomorrow I will elgreco my room," et cetera. The size of the set of such words is identical to the size of the set of names of artists sufficiently well known to allow the reader to visualize what it would mean for the thing named to be "[artist]ed." For a science fiction poet (or any narrative poet) even that limit can be set aside; the poet simply uses part of the poem to establish that some name is the name of a hypothetical artist, and to characterize that artist's work in a way that the reader can understand, and then applies the rule to produce the adjective or verb. It would be sufficient to include the information that "Klegdelloria" was "the Martian Cézanne" and then talk of something being "klegdellorianed." And the process

can be extended to other famous names, to give you such lines as "Read this letter isaacasimoved by day" or "study this treatise harlanellisoned by night" or whatever strikes your fancy.

Other neologisms are not so obviously productive. Suppose I imagine a creature analogous to a vampire, that survives by coming out of its grave at night and tapping living trees for the sap; suppose I avoid the easy solution of calling it a "sappire" and arbitrarily name it a "keripink." That's not a naturally productive form. I could create a whole set of vampire analogs—some that tapped water pipes, some that tapped beer kegs, some that tapped perfume bottles—and use a rule to name them "seripink, feripink, teripink," respectively. But that rule wouldn't be immediately available to other poets, and clear to readers, in the way that the "cezanned" rule is.

Example and Analysis

Let's take a look at an excerpt from a science fiction poem that contains much lexical deviance, and discuss what goes on in it.

extraperceptory sensation

in this web
we BE
where we ARE
star-anchored
we are angered by
those
who will not join the dance
(ah, friend
bend to my touch,
touched, lend me your mindtips)
here, hear more
than all you have heard
heretofore

in this ruled random
where lovepulses leap tenderly
tracing
(is such sin taxing?)
from connection beloved to connection,

the irritants wear
(while we ARE)
their handy deafcaps blithely
saying
"See! Man ticks slowly.…"

The poem's title "extraperceptory sensation," is formed by exchanging sound segments from the phrase "extrasensory perception"; it's a deliberate spoonerism, like Spooner's famous "queer old dean" for "dear old queen." It goes beyond the limits of what most typically happens in ordinary language because it exchanges whole syllables instead of single sounds or sound clusters. And that is to be expected: *All processes of poetic language are extensions of ordinary-language processes.*

The next neologism is "star-anchored," and that's an easy one; it can only mean "anchored to/by a star" or "anchored like a star." I wanted it to be understood as anchored like a star, in the folk sense of star-with-separate-points; one of the reasons I used "web" and "connection" and "ruled random" was to reinforce that semantic element of a thing anchored at various separate points. (This didn't work, by the way; when I've polled my poetics or stylistics students, they've invariably said it means "anchored to/by a star.")

"Mindtips" probably does work, because it's easy to see the analogy to "fingertips" after "bend to my touch." However, I wanted to be sure that the mindtips would be understood to be organs of perception the way ears are organs of perception, and so I put it into the sequence "lend me your mindtips" to remind people of "lend me your ears" in *Julius Caesar*. And just in case that still wasn't enough, I followed it with "here, hear"—both rhyming with "ear"—and "heretofore." This was excessive; I should have had more faith in my readers than that.

The next neologism is "lovepulses," which is not only obvious but trite; if I were writing this poem today I'd throw out "lovepulses" as too cutesypie to use, but in 1968 I thought it was very clever. And finally, there is "deafcaps," which—sitting next to "handy"—is intended to be wordplay based on "handicaps." (I'll come back to "deafcaps" again later in this chapter.)

Coining new words looks flashy, but is relatively easy to do. For English it's done in the following ways:

1. by borrowing from other languages, as was done with "automobile" and "telephone"

2. by modifying existing words in some way, as I did with

"mindtips" and "deafcaps" in the example poem

3. by using parts (usually, in English, the first letters) of a sequence of words to create an acronym, which is how "radar" and "sonar" were lexicalized

4. by resurrecting words no longer used, as James Joyce did when he used the obsolete "quark" (subsequently appropriated by physicists)

5. by outright inventions, a process I used when I called my sap-sucking vampire-analog a "keripink."

Only the last mechanism is difficult; all the others, for a poet—perhaps especially for a science fiction poet—are just fun.

Choosing Among Words That Already Exist

What *is* hard is choosing among existing words. Sometimes the choice is imposed on you by such things as rhyme and meter, as when any bird at all would do but you need a rhyme for "grow" and so you choose "crow" rather than "hawk." Sometimes line length requires you to choose one word rather than another, as when you've decided to write a poem in the shape of a dragon and only one of a set of half a dozen possible words will serve to outline the left wing. Sometimes you have set up a poem that you want patterned with the consonant sounds /p/ and /f/ and the vowel sound /u/ (pronounced "oo"), and that makes it obvious that you should choose "proof" rather than "evidence." But much of the time you don't have absolutely clear constraints like those available, and you have to make your choices in less obvious ways.

An excellent technique for working with lexical patterning—in order to make yourself aware of what you already know, so that you can use that information consistently and systematically—is to take other people's poems and deliberately change their lexical choices. I said in the first chapter that using "Build thee more stately big houses" for "Build thee more stately mansions" would ruin the line. Why? Because "big houses" lacks the elegant tone that "stately" has, and therefore does not fit with "stately" the way that "mansions" does; because English word order rules prefer "big stately houses" to "stately big houses"; and because "big houses" is three syllables where "mansions" is only two, and that flaws the metric pattern of the line. There are at least those three

clear and good reasons.

Take some lines from poems that interest you, and analyze their lexical items this way. Substitute words or phrases that are synonymous or nearly synonymous for the words the poet used. Then consider your results carefully. Is your line better or worse than the original line, to your way of thinking? Why? The "why" is what really matters. It may be accurate to say "It just looks/sounds/feels better to me," but that doesn't teach you anything about your poetic competence. What you're trying to do is make yourself consciously aware of the principles you use for lexical patterning; to do that you need to find out why you do what you do. If you have a choice among three words and it makes no difference at all to you which one goes into your line, that's not interesting. But if you perceive two of the three words as clearly wrong choices and the other one as the right choice, you are basing your decision on something. It would be valuable for you as a poet to find out what that something is.

I run into poets who are afraid that exercises like this will destroy them as poets … will eliminate their spontaneity, will make their poetry stilted, will turn them into mechanistic hacks, et cetera. If this is a concern of yours, by all means avoid my suggestions. But I think the concern is unnecessary. It's like suggesting that Bach would have written better music if he hadn't known music theory and had simply relied on inspiration.

Now let's go back to the example poem on pages 39-40, this time from the point of view of making choices that aren't neologisms. What do I know about what I was doing?

I used "in this web," for example. Why? Why not "spiderweb" or "network" or "grid"? There were reasons. I was going to use a violation from another level of the grammar, where a rule of Standard English says you can't use "be" as an active verb. To answer "What are you doing?" with "I'm being" isn't Standard English; it's poetry, or a joke, or a smart crack, or a mistake. The idea of actively *being*, just like actively singing or actively running, was an important part of the poem for me. So I did three things. I chose "web," which uses the letters of "we be"; I contrasted the ungrammatical (in prose) "we be" with the grammatical "we are" (which I reinforced all over the poem with "where" and "wear" and repetition); and I put both "be" and "are" in capital letters. "Network" and "grid" wouldn't have contributed anything to this effort. "Spiderweb" was possible, but it's so much longer than "we be" that it's not as good a prompt—and the strongly stressed "spider" tends to push "web" into the background. I wanted it in the foreground.

The choices I made in "is such sin taxing?" weren't free choices, be-

cause I was making a pun on "syntax"; I couldn't have done that with "is such sin an effort?" or "is such wickedness taxing?" Similarly, I had little choice about "See! Man ticks slowly …" because it was a pun on "semantics" and only certain kinds of words could reasonably follow "ticks" in the sequence. Those two puns were intended to work as a set, and they were lexical deviance deliberately introduced because (a) the poem was about communication, and syntax and semantics are terms from the technical vocabulary of linguistics, and (b) I was a linguistics graduate student showing off my jargon. They probably don't work at all. If a reader spots one, the other will also be spotted, but usually both fail. I wrote this poem about thirty years ago; I certainly was doing things deliberately, but I wasn't doing them very well.

Then there's "handy deafcaps"…. Why not "blindcaps?" Why not "useful" or "convenient" rather than "handy"? Because I was punning again. The phrase is a play on "handicap," referring to those who are handicapped in the fictional universe of the poem because they're not telepathic (have no "mindtips" or can't "lend" them); that made "handy" or "unhandy" the only possible lexical choices. I used "deafcaps" because I wanted to reinforce that comparison of mindtips to ears again. You'll note that I was then a poet who thought readers couldn't be trusted to do anything for themselves, a most unseemly sort of arrogance. I can see today that "handy blindcaps" would have been better, because certainly the perceptual organ in telepathic communication would not be biased toward either hearing or sight; it would have been better to introduce other perceptory organs besides ears. I wasn't skilled enough at the time to realize that.

I chose "irritants" to wear the deafcaps for several reasons. I had begun by declaring that the telepathic speakers in the poem were angered by those who won't "join the dance." Anger and irritation make a nice reinforcing pair. And I was trying for the idea that someone inside your head but not doing anything there—if, for example, you were able to read that person's thoughts but they were unable or unwilling to read yours—would be an irritant, exactly the way a grain of sand is an irritant to an oyster. This is a terrible mistake, and should be in some other poem; it turns the offending non-telepath into a pearl in the poem, and introduces a whole batch of content I didn't want in there. Dreadful. I was thinking of the oyster, which doubtless is glad to be rid of the pearl; I had completely lost track of the pearlfisher.

Finally, what does "ruled random" accomplish? Very little. It was like "web," a way of referring to the telepathic network in which various individuals—like the points of stars—serve as anchors. But I chose it because it was a violation; by definition a thing that is "ruled" cannot be

"random," and vice versa. It's like Chomsky's "colorless green ideas." It has a pleasant effect in terms of sound patterns, but it's otherwise very weak; I put it in there to show how extraordinarily witty I was, and that is exactly what it looks like.

It's fashionable in literary circles to say that lexical choice is a matter of "a good ear" and "a good dictionary" and that "nobody needs to be told" things like those I've been telling you. I disagree; I think it's very important and much neglected. When you are a poetry editor, you rarely see poems that have to be rejected because their rhymes and/or rhythms don't work—most poets quickly learn to avoid those mistakes. (And if you do reject on that basis, it's easy to circle the mistake and suggest that it be fixed and the poem re-submitted.) But I have sent poems back by the bale because they were flawed by poor lexical choices or poor lexical patterning or both. Many editors reject poems on that basis but don't have the time to explain to the poet how matters could be improved, even if they have the skill. The poet whose work is rejected for this reason is unlikely to figure it out without help, and a scribbled "this poem is trite" or "this poem is weak" isn't likely to clarify the problem.

If you make word palettes for your poems, as suggested in Chapter Three, you'll have sets of choices laid out before you for careful consideration. Some will be dictated by rhyme or meter or graphics, by sound patterns or visual patterns. But when no such reason is available, it's valuable for you to determine what is behind your choice. If it makes no difference to you which word you choose, then it may be that *none* of the words is the right one, and you should look for other possibilities. In poetry you select a pattern and choose words to fit it, and because the words are few, each one must do something significant. For each word you choose, you need to be able to answer the question: What does this lexical choice do for my poem? When you have the answer, you are ready to ask yourself whether some other choice would do that even better.

When you write a novel, each individual word doesn't have that kind of crucial significance. For a science fiction writer to be like Flaubert and consider a single prose paragraph the proper output for a full day's work is impossible unless that writer has great wealth and vast leisure. But in a poem, every word has to count and should be there for a reason. The more you know about what your reasons are, the more powerful your craft will be. Science fiction poetry offers you the luxury of neologizing and wordplay almost without limit; that is cause for gratitude, and for taking advantage of the blessed abundance.

Chapter Five
Syntactic/Semantic Patterning: How Poets Use Grammar Rules

The grammar of a language includes at least its phonology (the sound system), its morphology (words and parts of words), its syntax (rules for combining words into larger units), its semantics (meaning), and its non-verbal communication system. The divisions among these levels are artificial, because no part of the grammar can function without the simultaneous operation of all the other parts, but nobody has yet figured out any way to discuss all (or even two) parts simultaneously. In this chapter I will compromise; I'll begin with syntactic patterning and continue with semantic patterning, but I'll make references back and forth between the two as I go along, whenever their interdependence makes it necessary.

There's much controversy in the academic disciplines that are involved in the analysis of poetic language and poetry. (This will come as no surprise to anyone.) The two major points of argument are these:

1. Is there a "grammar of poetic language" in the same way that there is a grammar of ordinary language?

2. Do poets know what they're doing?

These two questions are really the *same* question, because if poets do know what they're doing they have to be doing it systematically, according to a set of rules and/or constraints. But the distinction between the two questions is maintained because, as with ordinary language, it's possible for poets to be using a grammar of poetic language without having any conscious awareness of it whatsoever.

Many distinguished scholars insist that the methods used for analysis of ordinary language are totally wrong for poetry. Either they propose for poetry a grammar entirely separate from that of ordinary language, or they propose that poets depend primarily upon inspiration. The latter group find any scientific analysis of poetry offensive; they consider it to be an "art" that should not be subject to such analysis. I respect these views, but I disagree, and I won't be discussing them further; you'll find them abundantly represented in the academic literature on poetry and criticism. The position taken by the opposite side is that the grammar that produces ordinary language also produces poetic language, and that all grammatical operations of poetry are extensions of grammatical operations of ordinary language; that is the position I will be following here.

In all human languages there are only four kinds of grammatical operations, no matter what part of the grammar is under discussion. The four operations are deletion, insertion, substitution, and movement. The rule that yields "Eat your peas" (by removing the "you" that is its subject) is a deletion rule. The rule that yields "It's storming in Boston," although there is no "it" that storms, is an insertion rule. The rule that gets you from the meaning represented by "John behaves John" to the acceptable sentence "John behaves himself" is a substitution rule; it substitutes a pronoun for the second instance of two identical noun phrases that refer to the same entity. And the rule that yields "Squid, I would never eat" is a movement rule that has operated on the more basic "I would never eat squid," where "squid" has been chosen by the speaker or writer to be the focus point of the sentence.

In ordinary language, all these rules are subject to rigid constraints. And all of them are subject to the semantic constraints called "selectional restrictions" that are deeply involved in choosing morphemes. For example, the object of the verb "eat" must be something edible, the subject of the predicate "be pregnant" must (so far) be something female, the subject of the verb "think" must be animate, and so on. Sequences that violate these restrictions are understood as metaphors, or jokes, or mistakes, or poetry.

What happens in poetry is that these selectional restrictions, as well as

the constraints on the four grammatical operations, become optional, and that is where the deviance comes from. Poetry deviates from the grammar of ordinary language, and is recognized as deviant by reference *to* that grammar of ordinary language.

In ordinary language the reason for the persnicketyness is that the rules all work together to preserve the speaker/writer's meaning so that the listener/reader/signer/observer will understand what is intended. Suppose you just decided arbitrarily that you didn't like the rule that inserts "it" into "it is raining" and that from now on you were going to insert "perflage" instead. Nobody could keep you from doing that. But when you walked into a room and said, "Wow, perflage is hailing like crazy out there!" you would have no reason to believe that anybody would understand what you meant, and lots of reasons to believe that they wouldn't bother to try.

In poetry, things are very different. The only limit poets have to abide by is their personal concern for being understood by their readers, which —in the real world—will usually include editors and publishers. This is the celebrated "poetic license" that so infuriates the hard core traditionalists; for a vast array of examples of that "license" being used extensively, I refer you to the work of such poets as e. e. cummings and John Berryman and Michael McClure.

Readers who are strongly opposed to nontraditional poetry (or to any poetry) often complain that a modern poet is allowed to do anything at all—this is the "a blindfolded chimpanzee could write that" school. They are wrong, unless the poet literally has no interest in being understood. Otherwise, there are things that cannot be done; I'll give you a single example.

English has a rule allowing you to delete the second of two identical sequences when they follow one of the English auxiliary verbs (will, may, must, et cetera). So, instead of "If Mary says she will win the Nebula, she will win the Nebula," you are allowed to say, "If Mary says she will win the Nebula, she will." Such a sentence is understood because the first of the identical sequences is still there to refer to. Now suppose that you, as poet, have in mind a poetic line that goes like this: "If Heather says she will go on a quest, she will stay home instead." You can use your poetic license and delete the sequence after the second "will"—deciding that you'll just ignore the constraint that says it has to be identical to the sequence after the first "will"; nobody can stop you from doing that. But the result—"If Heather says she will go on a quest, she will"—will be understood by your reader to mean "If Heather says she will go on a quest, she will go on a quest," *no matter how good you are as a poet*. That

bit about Heather staying home, which was part of what you wanted your line to mean to the reader, is lost forever, and there is not one thing you can do about it.

A poet who decides to ignore all word order restrictions has not gone beyond what is possible. A line like "robots overwhelmed lawn the on the unicorns hysterical the" is possible because all its parts are still present. If you are a skilled poet, and you have readers who are willing to struggle with the problem, they can determine that your meaning is either "the robots overwhelmed the hysterical unicorns on the lawn" or "the hysterical robots overwhelmed the unicorns on the lawn." Since selectional restrictions are optional in poetry, robots can be described as hysterical, and both readings are possible.

The poet who, like e.e. cummings, decides to ignore the order of letters within the words and scramble those too—and perhaps put punctuation marks in among the scrambled letters—is in the same position, but has pushed the limit farther; this may or may not succeed. But not even the most skillful poet can make "If Heather says she will go on a quest, she will" mean anything but "If Heather says she will go on a quest, she will go on a quest." If you know a way to get out of this, don't keep it to yourself! It's the sort of thing that wins hefty grants and prestigious scientific awards; by all means, write it up and get the credit you deserve. Until then, it demonstrates clearly that poetic "license" has limits.

Constructing Phantom Constituents

In ordinary language, the assumption is that the speaker/writer has some meaning in mind and uses the rules of the grammar to lexicalize that meaning (give it a surface shape) and turn it into a spoken or written or signed utterance in a way that comes as close as possible to expressing what was intended. The same thing is true in poetry, but the poet relies on the reader to be willing to work hard to recover the meaning from the surface shape provided. In ordinary conversation or writing you can't count on that; how much you can count on it in poetry depends on how good a poet you are and how much your reader or listener is willing to cooperate with you.

Consider this sentence:

> "Tracy was an orphan, and she missed them both."

In ordinary language that violates the rules and it's unacceptable—but

people don't have any trouble understanding it. Part of the meaning of the word "orphan" is something like "a person who has neither mother nor father living"; that information is filed in the mental dictionary of both speaker and hearer (or signer and observer). You understand "them both" in the sentence as referring to the deceased parents, who are therefore phantom constituents. In ordinary language, that's forbidden; in poetry, it's encouraged. In science fiction poetry you could get a lot of mileage out of "Tracy was an orphan, and she missed all eleven of them," which would give us a perfectly possible science fiction poem. Like this …

Poor Tracy

Tracy was
an orphan, and
she
missed
all eleven
of them

All right? It deviates from existing reality, proposing that there is a universe in which a person can have eleven biological parents; the science component is biology (or perhaps genetics or medicine); and the narrative element is "Tracy had eleven biological parents, and they all died, and she missed them."

In ordinary written language, setting up phantom constituents is usually difficult. It depends on such things as finding words that have meanings with obligatory pieces the way "orphan" does and putting them into sequences where they are obvious, and it's usually more trouble than it's worth. When it happens, it's reasonable to assume that it's an accident—a performance problem. But in poetry you have the luxury of a permanent form for the sequence of language, a form that readers can look at over and over until they figure out what the phantoms are. Because human beings take pleasure in solving problems, and in finding the missing parts of patterns, they can be counted on to do that, with varying degrees of skill and enthusiasm.

* * *

Example and Analysis

This is an example of a science fiction poem that contains a lot of syntactic and semantic deviations, for discussion.

NAKEDIALOGUE

O my dearest love, you must not *think*
you *must* [GET BACK BACK BACK!!] not
think I do not love you, in your gloried wordcloak,
as you *seem*,
my darling [STAY BACK BACK BAAAAACK!!!];
I have heard you speak and seen the people,
purring, lapped in your language, ready to be
mastered by your most simple, your most
casual [NONE OF THEM ARE CASUAL!!] word …
love, be satisfied.
Let me too be a great warmed cat,
stroke my thick-furred belly and back and I promise you
I will writhe my pleasure round you
till you have no words left, till they fall softly from you
like
feathers …
but I could not bear what-you-really-are; you are
mind-
twining-
twined-
minding …

That
Just [!]
That

is your mindtouch.
above my right I.
is your shower-of-gold.

Get out of my head! You are so lovely … you will break my heart
You [IN THAT WINDSWEPT CIRCLE WE COULD SPEAK FREELY]
must be [A SKULL IS LARGER FAR THAN ALLOFSPACE] only
what-you-seem [GET OUT OUT OUT *OUT OUT!!!!!*] to be.
Lady, I do not choose to know, I do not dare,
such privilege is the winding { stair / stain } to the attic brain

where all things rotten
drip toward thoughtslime.

Come with me to the suburbs and be my love
and we will all the customary pleasures prove
and you will grace me
carrying sheafs of lilacs over my lawn
and there is nothing that I will not do for you
[THEN, *LET* ME _____] except [THEN, *ACCEPT* MY _____]
I cannot face [THAT IS NOT MY FACE.… FEEL
THE SMELL OF CINNAMON AND THE PEEL OF LEMON]
your
thinking. [?????] … [AND HEAR THE SOUND OF
FRESH CUT { THYME }]
TIME

Beloved, let me love you;
do not lay aside
the decent seemly clothing of your mind.

[DEAR ONE, I AM VERY LONELY HERE, WATCHING
YOU
RUN …]

I don't know whether this poem works or not; probably not. I was trying to present a dialogue between two telepaths who are trying to keep their telepathy from destroying their relationship. As a narrative, that plot is a science fiction cliché, or at least one of those plots that must be done extremely well to avoid cliché. The poem is intended to present both sides of the dialogue simultaneously, which is a violation of the English discourse rule that says only one person may talk or sign (or write) at a time. It has the necessary narrative element, its science component is neuroscience and/or linguistics, and it deviates from accepted reality; in that sense it is a science fiction poem, whatever its quality.

The title "NAKEDIALOGUE" overlaps the end of one word with the beginning of another by deleting one of the letter Ds; this violates the graphics and lexical constraints of English, but is understandable because one of the pair remains. If I had tried to use "NAKEIALOGUE" the chances of being understood would have been slim at best. The sequences in capital letters inside brackets, as in "you must [GET BACK BACK BACK!!]" indicate utterances inside other utterances, with the contrast between upper case and lower case letters being used as a sym-

bolic analog for the contrast between two different voices. The bracketed sequences are an extension of the process of ordinary language known as embedding, as when you use "I knew that Mary would forget that the art auction starts at noon" to embed "the art auction starts at noon" inside "Mary would forget that …" and to embed "Mary would forget that the art auction …" inside "I knew that Mary …" In ordinary language the rules don't allow the embedding of one speaker/signer/writer's utterances inside another speaker/signer/writer's utterances; I've violated these rules throughout the poem.

The line that includes "your most casual [NONE OF THEM ARE CASUAL!] word …" involves a phantom constituent. It has "them" substituting for a phantom "MY WORDS" in "NONE OF MY WORDS ARE CASUAL," but "MY WORDS" isn't present in the way that "A DECEASED MOTHER AND FATHER" are present in the word "orphan." There would be no way to know what "them" referred to if the sequence "none of them are casual" occurred in isolation, and it's only the fact that the sequence is embedded in the other speaker's "your most casual word" that makes it possible to understand the meaning of "them." I've allowed one speaker to refer to something in the other speaker's utterance, and to do it before the utterance has been made; this is called "mindreading" and is ungrammatical, although any rude person who goes around finishing other people's sentences for them does it all the time.

The lines about the cat are plain old-fashioned garden variety metaphor of the "My love is a rose" type. This is conventional in English poetry, anything but novel, and requires no further comment; however, it does violate many a selectional restriction. "I will writhe my pleasure round you" is a minor deviation that relies on the phrase "wrap X round Y" in the context established by this metaphorical cat, and the similarity of "writhe" to "wrap," and the mention of thick fur.

The deviation in "but I could not bear what-you-really-are" is that it fails to lexicalize a chunk of meaning. Suppose I were to tell you to sit down at the table by saying, "Sit down at that-constructed-object-at-which-eating-customarily-takes-place." The be-hyphened sequence would be a failure on my part to lexicalize that chunk by using either "table" or the accepted "whatchamacallit" or "thingamajig" that are acceptable lexicalizations when you have temporarily forgotten the word needed. The poem presupposes that no lexicalization for "what-you-really-are" exists in English. Unlike the situation in non-telepathic communication, however, the persons involved have access to one another's unlexicalized meanings, and this is the result.

Then come the three lines with the giant exclamation point in the middle of them in brackets; this is an attempt at symbolization/lexicalization of body language (astonishment, emphatically expressed), but the body language is within the mind where it's not considered perceptible in existing reality.

"Just above my right I" is a syntactic/semantic violation, since it assumes the existence of a left "I" as well and substitutes "I" for "eye" on the basis of identical sound alone. This is trite; there must be tens of thousands of poems that use the accidental sound-identity of "eye" and "I" this way.

The pair of lines beginning with "lady, I do not choose to know" and ending with "the attic brain" was fun to do; it just plays about with graphics to collapse "privilege is the winding stair" (rhyming with "dare") and "privilege is the winding stain" (rhyming with "brain") into a single sequence. It would be simple to write a formal rule for this operation, and to generate an infinite number of other such pairs from the rule; it is an extension of the use of ambiguous sequences in ordinary language. For example, "Visiting dragons can be dangerous" is understood as meaning either "to visit dragons can be dangerous" or "dragons that are visiting can be dangerous"; but in ordinary language you aren't allowed to express both possibilities in a single utterance at the same time. Furthermore, "Visiting dragons can be dangerous" could not be used in ordinary language to mean the pair "Visiting dragons …" and "Visiting dungeons …" just because they happen to be similar in sound and shape. In poetry all of that is perfectly possible.

The line "you will grace me" violates the semantic selectional restrictions; people cannot "grace" people, although they can grace somebody's table; this is piddling deviance, quite traditional. We understand sequences like this by transferring part of the meaning of one element to another one that ordinarily lacks it. For example, as Uriel Weinreich has explained, we would understand the phrase "a vampire ago" by transferring the semantic feature [+TIME] that belongs to words like "month" and "day" and "year" to the word "vampire," using the familiar frame "a _____ ago" as a way of making the transfer clear. (For more on this process, see Weinreich 1963.)

Now we come to the line that has two utterances in brackets flanking "except"; this is deviance pushed to the limit. There's no way at all to determine what would fill the two blanks; whatever isn't being lexicalized, or whatever has been deleted, is just absent. You can't recover it from the context, and nothing in the surface structure provides clues. I did this deliberately, knowing that it meant total absence of meaning, be-

cause I really wanted to leave it entirely to the reader's imagination. This is like what's routinely done in science fiction when the writer chooses to leave to the reader's imagination the precise details of how the loathsome alien creature looked, or what the loathsome alien creature did, and is a convention of the genre.

There are minor violations of selectional restrictions when one speaker commands the other to feel the smell of cinnamon and lemon peel, and to hear the sound of fresh-cut thyme/time, with the deviance compounded by the fact that time is not something that can—in ordinary language—be "fresh-cut."

The poem ends with a pair of utterances that present both sides of the dialogue in summary, overtly. One begs the other to stop the telepathy because it's horrible and will make love impossible; the other, either having refused to do that or being unable to do that, mourns the loneliness of watching the reluctant one flee.

Everybody who speaks or signs a human language has a dialect different from every other dialect whatsoever (called an *idiolect*) and every poet has his or her own idiolect of the poetic grammar. You might observe someone's spoken dialect and notice that they consistently leave the final "g" off their "-ing" morphemes; you might decide that you liked the effect and were going to add it to your own idiolect; thereafter you would say "I'm tired of walkin' when ridin' would be more fun." In the same way, you might examine a poet's poetic idiolect, observe some pattern that you liked, and decide to use it too. You might decide that those curly braces of mine are handy, and add them to your own poetry. When this sort of borrowing is carried to an extreme, the result is parody—which is often very satisfyingly funny, if it's intentional—and any properly programmed computer could do it. We recognize a poem by a particular poet because we recognize that poet's idiolect in use, and we refer to it as a "style" or a "voice."

Another example of a systematic (and very borrowable) syntactic/semantic violation is the deletion of one of a pair of roughly identical forms at the end of one line and the beginning of another. It has an ancient history; in Japanese court poetry it was referred to as the use of "pillow" elements. I've seen Heinlein (in *I Will Fear No Evil*) do this in "prose" for more than a whole page without stopping. The process looks like this:

> I bridled a unicorn
> is a mythical beast
> is under the mountain

It collapses "I bridled a unicorn" with "a unicorn is a mythical beast" by deleting one instance of "a unicorn." It collapses "a unicorn is a mythical beast" with "a mythical beast is under the mountain" by deleting one instance of "a mythical beast." The poet uses the privilege of setting line length to reinforce and clarify the meaning, as in the examples above.

This process is more rigidly constrained in English than it is in Japanese; for example, it won't usually work if one of the pair of identical forms is a noun and the other is a verb. If you try it with "Don't tell a lie" and "lie in my bed" it will fail. The two words "lie" are identical, which is required; and they are right next to one another, which is required. But the result—"Don't tell a lie/in my bed"—loses the meaning of the second command irretrievably.

I first noticed this process in the poems of e. e. cummings, and then began hunting for examples of it in the poems of others; I found the description of its use in Japanese poetry by accident, and later was astonished to find it being done for nearly two pages in Heinlein's novel. I had written a paper about it, and proposed some constraints, and then Heinlein proved me wrong. I had claimed that English would not allow you to do this with only part of a word. But Heinlein had an example something like this: "She had other fish to Friday is the fifth day of the week." Which demonstrated that you can do it with parts of words—not even morphemes, just parts—if they are in an idiom or fixed phrase such as "other fish to fry." People know the whole phrase as a single chunk, and the meaning doesn't get lost just because you take out a piece.

I added this process to my own poetic dialect because I liked it, and I liked its effect, and it was a challenge; unlike many sorts of poetic deviance (the "my love is a rose" metaphorical process, for instance) this one appears not to happen in ordinary language. It's an extension of a grammatical process of ordinary language (the process of deletion under identity, as in "If she says she will go on a quest, she will"); but so far as I can determine, it never happens except in poetry. That makes it novel, and interesting.

I recommend to you as an exercise the sort of analysis I've done here. Look at your poems carefully. Identify your syntactic/semantic violations. Decide what type of rule or rules you are breaking, and how you are accomplishing that, and what purpose it serves in your poem to do that. This will increase your own awareness of your poetic competence and make that competence more acceptable to your conscious mind for use in your work, thus strengthening your poetcraft. Look at the work

of other poets in the same way, and for similar reasons. If it offends you to borrow something from another poet's idiolect, don't borrow; the analytic exercise will still increase your poetic skills.

There aren't many markets in the science fiction magazines right now for poetry that has wildly extensive syntactic deviance; the audience of science fiction poetry readers is not that large or that dedicated. Editors know that; they may be reluctant to publish a poem if they have to struggle to understand it because of syntactic violations like wildly scrambled word order. If you're unwilling to restrain your syntax, your poetry should be submitted only to publications that welcome nontraditional work. That is, it should go to speculative poetry journals and "little" literary magazines and reviews rather than to *Asimov's*. However, almost any degree of semantic violation is allowed, and even encouraged, in science fiction poetry, in keeping with the requirement to deviate from ordinary reality.

Chapter Six
Through the Old Credibility Gap

One of the major technical problems in writing fiction of any denomination is believability—how to counter the *oh yeah?* reaction in the reader. Mainstream fiction has it a bit easier, since it can fall back on that set of consensus statements we call the Real World. The fairy tale has an easy out, since unbelief is automatically suspended if the rules are followed: Start with "Once upon a time"; end with "And they lived happily ever after"; and in between, things must come along in ones, twos, threes, or sevens. Science fiction does not have these advantages.

Science fiction poetry can't rely on saying "this is real because it happened as written," because it has to deviate from existing reality. It has no set of recognized conventions (like "once upon a time") to signal automatic suspension of disbelief. In mainstream poetry there is the convention that when a poet says "My love has a nightingale in her throat" we understand that there's no intention to include the lice and parasites and bird-dung that are associated with real world nightingales. But in a science fiction poem you can't rely on that at all. The lice and dung may be crucial to the poem; the poem may be about an alien culture in which every young girl at puberty goes through a rite of passage that involves having a real bird stuffed down her throat. It takes a long tradition to build a set of conventions for a literary form, and science fiction poetry hasn't had time to do that. Finally, the science fiction poem almost always must be short. The tolerance of the contemporary reader for poetry tops out at about one hundred lines, and it's safe to assume that the tolerance for science fiction poetry is even lower than that in all but the fanatics who do such things as belong to the Science Fiction Poetry As-

sociation.

When you combine the restrictions just described, you will realize that their sum is this: The science fiction poet who wants to be widely published and widely read must produce the verse equivalent of the short-short story, without the advantage of the established conventions that help the short-short story writer. That it can be done at all is amazing; that it's often done superbly well is a kind of miracle. (The skilled and effective science fiction poet ought to have the sort of fame and fortune enjoyed by rock stars—but in America today that is a fantasy.)

There is neither time nor space in a science fiction poem to indulge in the sort of elaborate World Building & Universe Construction that is the staple resource of the science fiction prose writer. There's nowhere to put a chronology and a set of maps and a glossary. It all has to be done in a handful of lines of words. It's therefore very important to exploit to their fullest the resources the language offers you for making your work believable. In this chapter we'll examine one of the most powerful of those resources—presupposition—briefly.

Presuppositions: Even My Gnome …

Consider the following sentence:

1. Even *John* could have written *that* poem.

If you are a native speaker of English you know that if that sentence is true, so are these two sentences:

2. The poem mentioned is a poor excuse for a poem.

3. John is no great shakes either.

Notice that neither of those sentences appears in the surface shape of "Even *John* could have written *that* poem" anywhere, but both are inescapably part of its meaning. Such semantic phantoms are called *presuppositions*; we say that #2 and #3 are presupposed of #1. It is the presuppositions imposed by English that will make you object to Sentence #4 and find it unbelievable.

4. Even *Shake*speare could have written *that* poem.

Assume that you wanted to get across in your work the fact that on Planet X men are looked upon as second-class creatures. There are several ways to go about passing this along to the reader. You can just say, "On Planet X, men were looked upon as second-class creatures"; you could put the information into a character's mouth, as in: "Looking the Terran ambassador firmly in the eye, the Empress of Planet X said, 'You must understand at once that on this planet men are looked upon as second-class creatures.'" Either of these will do the job and both are acceptable in limited usage; both are often boring.

There is a better way, as in this sentence: "She was only four years old, but she was not easily intimidated and she knew when she had been insulted. 'Even a *man* could answer *that* question!' she spat." That sentence does not come right out and say, "I, Writer, tell you, Reader, that [X]"; instead it slides the necessary information right through the Old Credibility Gap by presupposing it. And in a poem, where a very few words must accomplish this same task, the presupposition of information is one of your most valuable tools. For example:

5. Even a *man* could have taken *Mona's* throne.

That line presupposes that Mona's throne is ripe for plucking, and that little or no strength or skill or wisdom is needed to accomplish the deed. Begin your poem that way and you have saved yourself many lines of explanation.

How about this?

6. Even those who forget to eat their dead and drink their blood …

Gross. Certainly. But note that this pair of lines presupposes, without wasting one overt word, that those who do not routinely eat their dead

and drink their blood are abnormal and to be looked down upon, and it puts the reader immediately within the context of a fictional world where such ultimate recycling is the accepted mode of behavior.

The presuppositional trigger word in these examples has been "even," although no dictionary definition of "even" will explain why that is so. "Even" is only one of a large array of such triggers, all available to you as a fluent speaker of English to help you make your reader believe in the universe your poem presents, quickly and economically.

Another example is the possessive pronoun; English is so constructed that the use of these pronouns automatically presupposes the existence of the thing possessed. An adjective or two following the pronoun makes the presupposition of existence even more unavoidable, and that is why you won't care for these two sentences:

7. My horse does not exist.

8. My beautiful white horse does not exist.

To say "my smallest and my loveliest dragon" in a poetic line is far less likely to produce an *oh yeah?* than saying "I had a small and lovely dragon."

To stop doing something presupposes that you began doing it at some previous time. So …

9. When I ceased to buy my dragons from the Klarg and turned to markets beyond the Nether Rim …

You have, in those two lines, doubly presupposed the existence of your dragons, first by using the possessive "my" and second by using "ceased to buy," which presupposes that you at some earlier point in time started buying whatever it was and therefore they must have been in existence for purchase. Very handy; very economical.

Fifteen Ways to Presuppose Your Gnome

Anything that you can presuppose, you will not have to claim. In poetry this means a great saving of words, and in poetry that matters; I am going to provide you now with a list of linguistic environments that will allow you to economize in this way. All of them let you avoid making the *claim* that Gnomes exist, while still presupposing that they do. This isn't a complete list, but it's complete enough to illustrate the point. Where

necessary, I've added a few words of explanation, along with the necessary jargon.

1. The Gnome … (Some Gnomes, my Gnome, that Gnome …)

In English, the use of a determiner before anything you name presupposes that it exists. The definite and indefinite articles (a, an, some, the), the possessive pronouns (my, his, ours, et cetera), and the demonstratives (this, that, these, those) all function as determiners.

2. Gnasher Gnattly Gnome wobbled past.

The use of a proper name increases the presupposition of existence.

3. The pale and emaciated chiffon-shrouded Gnome wobbled past.

Here we see what is called a "definite description" used to make the proposed existence of the Gnome more believable. The more intricate and detailed that description is, within reason, the greater the presupposition of existence. That's why a sentence like "My beautiful white horse with the flowing mane and tail and the silver-studded saddle does not exist" is so strange.

4. Gnomes do not mate with bats.

The use of a generic term ("Beavers build dams") presupposes existence.

5. The stubborn Gnomes who had refused all our offers and blandishments wobbled past.

This illustrates the addition of a relative clause ("the X who [Sentence]") after you announce your candidate for existence; it's another kind of description, and it strengthens that candidacy.

6. It was a Gnome that stole the ancient talisman.
   What the Gnome needs is a saddle for his frog.

These two sentence patterns (called "cleft" and "pseudo-cleft") are used to put particular elements into the position of greatest semantic prominence in the sequence, the focus position. Anything that is the focus of

a sentence has its credibility enhanced by that status.

7. If that's the new Gnome, give her some beer.

The use of "the new Gnome" presupposes that there was an "old" Gnome previously; thus, Gnomes exist.

8. I wonder where the third Gnome is hiding?

As a "new" Gnome presupposes an old one, a "third" one presupposes a first, a second, and so on; thus, Gnomes exist.

9. But a bigger Gnome wouldn't fit in your pod, Commander!

A comparative (an adjective plus "-er" or "more [Adjective]") presupposes another such entity that has less of the characteristic mentioned. The same thing applies to the superlative (an adjective plus "-est" or "the most [Adjective]," as in "The biggest Gnome always arrived at the restaurant before dawn."

10. It's odd that the Gnomes arrived so early in the fall.

In English there is often a presupposition of truth, validity, etc., associated with an embedded sentence preceded by "that." "I know that" and "It's obvious that" presuppose that the sentence that follows is true.

11. If that Gnome kisses me again, I'll scream.

For the Gnome to have kissed you again, it has to have existed to kiss you at least once before.

12. Only the Gnome would swear loyalty to you, Sire.
Even the Gnome eats pizza.
Don't be alarmed, Sire—that was just the Gnome.

These three true adverbs—"only, even, just"—are extremely powerful; when you use them in sentences like those in the example, they increase your credibility, and they increase your Gnome's credibility.

13. If you had paid more attention to your Gnome, Young Prince, you would not be weeping in the swamplands now.

A pattern like this is called a "counterfactual" and oddly enough it adds believability. "Had I but heeded the Gnome's advice …" and "Would that I'd known the Gnome was lurking nearby …" are other examples of the same kind.

14. Wasn't it you that slapped the Gnome?

A negative question presupposes its positive counterpart—in this case, "It was you that slapped the Gnome."

15. The Gnome's arrogance assumed a sinister significance.

This last example, called a *nominalization*, is a very handy device in English for presupposing the existence of anything whatsoever. If you say "The poets destroyed the files," you have made that claim and must support it. If you say "The poets' destruction of the files surprised us all," you have presupposed that they destroyed the files, and all you are claiming is that we were surprised by that.

Nominalization turns verbs and adjectives into nouns, either by the use of special forms (abandon/abandonment, careless/carelessness, destroy/destruction) or by simply adding "ing" to the verb or to the "be" before the adjective. When nominalization is combined with a possessive, it's almost irresistibly compelling. So, "He is cruel" requires support; but both "His cruelty is astonishing" and "His being so cruel is astonishing" presuppose his cruelty.

Never think that credibility is unimportant in science fiction. The most unlikely Thing that ever oozed across a basement floor depends entirely on its believableness. Because the instant the reader says "I don't believe it," the Thing ceases to be frightening and is only silly. The reader who doesn't believe is a reader who doesn't care, and that reader will put your poem down and go read something else.

Chapter Seven
Marketing and Promoting Your Work

If you're not interested in getting your poems published, or you plan to self-publish exclusively, just skip this chapter and go on to the next. (If you do plan to self-publish, go to one of the excellent books available on the subject before you take the plunge. Self-publishing is both respectable and potentially profitable, but doing it without ample preparation is like choosing a stock portfolio by sticking a pin at random into a list of possibilities—very risky.)

Preparing and Submitting Your Work

The most important thing I can tell you on this topic is:

> *Always start by looking for the writers' guidelines for the publication you plan to send your work to.*

This is especially important for online publications that want you to submit your work by e-mail. The whole field of Internet poetry is in such a state of flux that requirements change constantly; be sure you check. (I won't be trying to cover e-mail submission requirements here. Perhaps by the time a new edition of this handbook is needed, things will have settled down sufficiently to make that possible, but that day hasn't yet arrived.) Most publications that use poetry either publish their requirements and preferences in writer's magazines and market guides, or they have a free guidelines sheet that you can send for or look at on the Internet, or both. Always check those preferences if you can; it will save you a lot of time and postage. It will keep you from sending limericks to edi-

tors who want only sonnets, and sonnets to editors who use only limericks. It will keep you from e-mailing poems to publications whose editors don't accept e-mail submissions, or sending print submissions to those that want only e-mail. It takes time to check the guidelines, and it can be tedious, but it has to be done. Otherwise, you risk having a poem rejected unread just because you've annoyed the editor.

In those rare cases when no guidelines are available, here are the basics.

1. Your poems have to be typed, on one side of the page only, on good quality white bond paper that is not the instant-erasing kind. I double space my poems so that that the editor can conveniently write between the lines, unless the publication's guidelines say specifically that I should single space. (Many poets disagree with me on this and always single space their work; others use one-and-a-half line spacing as a compromise.) Between the verses of a poem, add one extra space.

2. Whether you're using a typewriter or a computer, be sure that the printed result will be crisp and clear and easy to read, that you avoid unusual or hard-to-read typefaces, and that you use only black ink. The safest typefaces are twelve-point Courier and twelve-point Times Roman

3. Put only one poem on a page, even if it's only a few lines long. You do this so that, if the editor sees three of your poems and wants only one, the other two can be conveniently returned to you (and you can equally conveniently market them elsewhere). Even if you aren't asking that rejected poems be returned to you, it's awkward and inconvenient for editors to have to deal with more than one poem on a page.

4. If you know how many poems the editor in question prefers, send only that many. Otherwise, send no more than five in one batch; if you're sending long poems, send no more than two.

5. In the upper left-hand corner of the page, single-spaced, you put your vital statistics; in the upper right-hand corner you put the poem's statistics. Then you leave several inches of white space for the editor to write things in before you type in your poem's title and "by [your name]. Like this:

Tracy Poet Poem
100 Main Street 20 lines
Anytown, MO 33333
Member: SFWA/SFPA *(or whatever is correct for you)*

TITLE

by Tracy Poet

[text of poem]

6. If you're sending fewer than ten pages, you can fold them in thirds in the ordinary way and send them in a standard business envelope; for ten or more, mail them flat in a large manila envelope.

7. Don't staple your pages together or put them in a binder or folder or anything of that kind unless the guidelines specifically tell you to do so; that just makes it harder for the editor to look at them.

8. If you want your material to be returned to you, always enclose an envelope addressed to you, with enough postage on it. (If you send the poems in a manila envelope, enclose a manila return envelope or you will get the poems back folded and have to prepare new copies before you can mail them out again.) If you don't want rejected poems returned, enclose a #10 business envelope with a first class stamp on it so that the editor can use it to respond. Just including your e-mail address isn't enough, unless the guidelines for the publication specifically tell you that the editor prefers to respond by e-mail.

9. When you market prose, it's all right to make one or two corrections that show on a finished page, written neatly in black ink or typed in above the line of text. Most poems are so short, however, that doing that makes a bad impression; I'd advise you not to do it.

When you don't have information, use your common sense—read a

copy or two of the publication to see what sort of material is used, and follow the guidelines for manuscript preparation in this chapter. It's better to go wrong on the conservative side (fewer poems than the maximum allowed, for example) than on the radical side.

If you are Ray Bradbury or Ursula K. Le Guin you don't have to worry about these things; if you have written the greatest poem since "Paradise Lost" you don't—maybe—have to worry about these things. But most of us do have to worry about them, and I strongly recommend them.

I'm not going to include a list of markets in this book, because any list I might prepare would be out of date very quickly. (This is especially true now that there are Internet markets for poetry, which can appear and disappear almost overnight.) Instead, I refer you to the annual edition of *Poet's Market***,** which is available in almost any public library, and to the directories of small presses and literary magazines also available in libraries and on the Internet. Also valuable are the current market lists that appear in writers' magazines (watch for issues that feature poetry markets), the market information that appears in *Star*Line*, and the list of market links you'll find at the SFPA website (http://www.sfpoetry.com).

Improving Your Chances for Publication—Things *Not* to Do

Now, let's assume that you've done all the sensible things. You've prepared your manuscript in the proper way, and you haven't forgotten the SASE (self-addressed stamped envelope). You've tailored your material to the market that you're submitting it to, and you're complying with any requirements or preferences the editor has stated. Now what? Are there things you can do to increase the chances that your poem will be accepted, beyond this obvious minimum?

One thing you can do is make sure you've avoided all of the most common reasons for rejection. The list below is not ranked for degree of seriousness or anything of that kind, because that will differ from editor to editor; it's just one typical reason for rejection after another.

1. The poem contains clichés and trite expressions … sequences like "snow-white hands" and "heart of stone" and "turgid blood", et cetera.

2. The poem is set up like traditional rhymed and metered verse, but the rhymes don't work, or the lines don't scan (have mistakes in the meter),

or both.

3. The poem is about a subject that has recently been done to death. For example, a poem about the death of a unicorn sent to a magazine that has published three poems on that subject in the past year.

4. The poem is accompanied by a letter of self-advertisement for the poet, listing all the terrific things the poet has done lately, who the poet knows and how intimately, and strongly urging that the poems be accepted before someone else grabs them. No matter how good the work is, a letter like that will guarantee rejection. The same thing is true of a letter that gives the editor orders, such as, "If you decide not to accept my poems, please send a brief letter explaining the reason for the rejection in the enclosed envelope." This infuriates an editor—even an editor who, before reading your instructions, intended to do that.

5. The poem is gross. Unless you know, absolutely, that the publication welcomes work about disembowelment and extraterrestrial pus and so on, don't send this kind of thing.

6. The poem is an obvious near-clone of somebody else's poem. I'm not talking about plagiarism here—that's a very different matter. I'm talking about the poet who's read a lot of work by some other poet and has unintentionally written something that is recognizable as too close to the other's work. This happens all the time, and it happens to everybody, not just beginners.

7. The poem is racist, or sexist, or anything-ist. Editors don't need the controversy that sort of material brings them, even when they happen to agree with your opinions personally.

8. The poem is totally incomprehensible without very special knowledge like a Ph.D. in physics or a Ph.D. in Early Medieval Literature or a solid command of Japanese. (This is elitist, and is an extension of #7, but is so common that it deserves its own special number.) You're entitled to assume that science fiction readers will have some familiarity with broad principles of science. But if your poem can't be understood without a firm grasp of some highly specialized item (the Fibonacci series, the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, Göedel's Theorem, the Doppler effect, etc. ad infinitum) you are not entitled to take that knowledge for granted. Provide a definition in a footnote, or in a quotation between the title and

the body of the poem, or—best of all—find a way to work the definition of the term into the poem itself. Elitists among the readers will react by complaining that you've insulted their intelligence with your gratuitous explanations; don't worry about that. Most readers and editors will appreciate your courtesy.

9. The poem is wildly experimental in form. In science fiction poetry the market for that sort of thing is extremely limited.

10. The poem would be costly to print. This includes extremely long poems (anything over 200 lines), poems that require unusual typographic symbols, poems that have to be written in spirals or the shape of a rainbow—anything other than straight lines. Most publications won't print such work. If you have something extremely good that would cause problems of this kind, send the editor a query letter describing the work and asking permission to submit it. (Except in a case like this, I'd advise you never to send a query letter or cover letter for poems unless the guidelines tell you one is required.)

11. The poem is boring. What makes a poem boring will vary from editor to editor, but it's a frequent reason for rejection.

12. The poem mentions living persons or their work, or both, in a way that they might object to. The possible resulting commotion isn't worth the risk, from an editor's point of view.

I may have missed some important items, but if your work avoids this distasteful dozen, you will be well ahead of the pack. I have poetry-edited from time to time, and have been involved in considering poems for awards or grants from time to time, and for me the worst items on the list are #1, #4, #5, and #7. The last three of those are obvious, but the first must not be—I know that I have had a terrible time over the years making poets understand why a particular phrase (often their favorite phrase in the poem) is trite and should be replaced. Editors will sometimes accept an otherwise good poem that contains just one shopworn phrase, but that's the upper limit. If it's just one, it may not matter; if it does matter, the editor might write you and ask you to provide an improved substitute for that single phrase. Usually, however, the poem with one cliché is a poem with a dozen, because the writer doesn't clearly understand what clichés are.

Improving Your Chances for Publication—Things Worth Doing

There are also some positive things that you can do to better your chances. The primary principle is novelty. So few publications use science fiction poetry, and so much of it is submitted, that you need something to make your work stand out from the rest. For example:

1. Send poems that (when printed on the page) will be just about the size of the average business card. Editors frequently have little holes about that size that have to be filled with something; they can use a small ad, or a cartoon—or your poem.

2. Invent an interesting new poetic form, and send poems that fit it. And mention that in your title. You don't have to title a poem "Weary Android: A Sonnet," because the sonnet form is so familiar; but if your poem is an example of a form you invented called "the drodeau" your title should be "Weary Android: A Drodeau" or "A Drodeau for A Weary Android" or something similar.

3. Send poems on subjects that are unusual. During a single year, the editor will look at hundreds of poems about dragons (or robots, or the United States space program, or anything-at-all of amber). If your poem is one of those it has to be extraordinarily good to overcome the problem of satiation. Do a poem on the science of crop rotation, or anything else that's not being sent in constantly. (If you establish a reputation for yourself as a poet who writes on that more novel subject, you'll stake out a territory. Then, when an editor suddenly needs a poem on that subject, you'll get a request for such a poem. Very satisfying.)

4. Tie your poem to some marker of time. Submit a science fiction Christmas poem (in June, to allow for editorial and production time). Poems that are tied to a particular event (the return of Halley's Comet for example) are good, but will arrive in large numbers if the event is well known—look for events that aren't going to provoke competition. Send a poem tied to the birthday of an obscure scientist, or to the day something was discovered. Something that is less obvious than the flight at Kitty Hawk.

5. Send very well crafted sonnets or haikus. Both forms are extremely marketable, primarily—I'm sorry, but it's true—because they are so

short.

Here, for example, is a sonnet of mine that was in the December 1985 issue of *Asimov's*, on page 140:

Presuppositional Ghostbusting

EXAMPLE: "Even *John* could write *this* sonnet!"
It tells us John's worth little, and the sonnet less …
The linguist shakes that sentence like a rug,
pokes it with tweezers, tortures it in a press,
seeking what in it *says* that John's pathetic,
seeking what in it *says* the sonnet's poor.
Those words aren't in it anywhere. And words
are the only things of which a linguist can be sure.
What phantoms from deep structure, deep and shapeless,
does every native speaker hear and comprehend,
haunting the interstices of that sentence,
betraying both John and the sonnet in the end?
The linguist's mystification is still total:
why should they lurk in "even" and a modal?

6. Put genuinely interesting brief quotations between title and poem, as in the poem on pages 22-23 of this handbook.

7. Send poems that are funny. Humor is in short supply in science fiction, and most editors would be delighted to have good brief funny poems (which do not have to always be limericks). The exception to this is the strictly "literary" publication, which may have no interest in humor whatsoever.

There are countries where books of poetry routinely make the best seller lists and poets are celebrities whose names everyone knows; the United States is not (so far) one of those countries. There are American publications in which it is taken for granted that a dozen poems will appear each issue; none of the major science fiction (or fantasy, or horror, or even science) publications is like that, although some can be counted on to publish as many as four, and there are signs that the situation may now be slowly improving. *Being* a poet is easy: You write poems, and you are therefore a poet; you don't have to pass any qualifying exams or buy a license or set up a place of business. But making money as a poet,

much less making your living at it, is horrendously difficult in the United States. There are a few grants and fellowships to be had; there are a few markets that pay substantial money for poems; and there are a few slots for such roles as "poet in residence" in the schools. But they are *very* few, they are not receptive to science fiction poetry, the competition for them is ferocious, and most of the time that competition includes numerous well-established writers. The subset of such plums restricted to beginners and/or unknowns is miniscule.

It's not fair. Writing good poetry is at least as hard as writing good prose. The business side of being a poet—keeping records, mailing things out and keeping them going the rounds, filing taxes, promoting work if it does get published, futzing with copyeditors, all those endless things—is just as complex as the business side of being a prose writer. The only advantage a poet can be said to have it that he or she may have somewhat less typing to do than the average prose writer. But there's nothing much you can do to change the situation except to write and publish poetry so very good that it draws readers, who let editors know that it draws them, so that the editors will publish more. The only people who have any chance of changing the American apathy—or outright dislike—for poetry are the poets themselves. And when poets don't do the very best they can, but manage nonetheless to publish something that they just dashed off in a hurry and couldn't be bothered to polish, they reinforce the public perception that poetry is a waste of the page it's printed on. They can do themselves, and all other poets, real harm that way.

Building Your Image as a Science Fiction Poet

There are also a few things you can do that are slightly different than just the writing-and-submitting routine. You may not want to do any of these things, or you may not have time to do them. But they are worth doing if you're willing and able. They are primarily activities that serve to build the recognition of you *as* Poet, which—in this country, and with our media—is something that can help to place your work. If your name stands out in the cardboard box full of poems the editor has to plow doggedly through, that may get your poem the extra piece of editorial attention it needs to make it into print.

1. *Smuggle* your poetry into print. One of the reasons that I began writing science fiction novels and short stories was that I couldn't sell my science fiction poetry. I wrote prose into which I could put my poems,

tailoring the prose so that the poem was appropriate. This is a lot of trouble; on the other hand, it is a way to get paid for your work and get it into print.

2. Donate your poetry for "occasions," so that it will get publicity and build your reputation. If your town has a centennial, write a poem in honor of the event. Write poems for the County Fair, the opening of the local school, the Winter Festival, the Spring Carnival, the local basketball team. There's no reason at all why such poetry cannot be science fiction poetry. For your town's centennial, do a poem about what that town will be like in another hundred years. For the basketball team, do a mildly humorous poem in which your team is up against a team from outer space. It takes only minor ingenuity to slant a science fiction poem toward a real world place, event, entity, whatever. Submit this sort of work to your local paper, which will usually be delighted to get it (unless your local paper is the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, etc., in which case what you do is adopt a small town paper nearby.) If the poem is good, it will get picked up by other papers; furthermore, your congressperson will get sent a copy of it and will read it into the Congressional Record at taxpayer expense. Never take money for poems of this kind unless you have been commissioned to do them. You will benefit far more from the goodwill the poems earn for you than you would from the small sums of money that you're giving up. It's just barely possible that you'll find yourself in the position of the musician who is always asked to play for everything local for free, or the artist who's always being called on to dash off a drawing for everything local for free— it is possible. If it happens to you, congratulations! You put an end to it in exactly the same way such a musician or artist does: by explaining, politely but firmly, that you don't have time to do the requested items, until the hint is taken. (It's not a likely problem.)

3. Use your own poems for all your greeting cards, instead of the poems Hallmark provides. You don't have to be able to do art to manage this; if you'd feel uncomfortable using copies of a poem as holiday cards, buy appropriate cards that have no message printed on them or inside them. Copy or print your poem on a separate sheet, and insert the sheet in the card.

4. Enter contests, even if the prizes are very small. Apply for poetry awards—sometimes you get them, and they are good for the reputation. I got a Saxton Poetry Fellowship once, and although the resulting book

of poems was never published, that fellowship has opened many doors for me over the years.

5. Do poetry events. (See the chapter on readings and workshops for details.) And at those events, unless it's not appropriate or not allowed, have poetry merchandise for sale. Your own books, either self-published or commercially published, for example. I think audiences find it offensive when you do a sales pitch for your own work from the podium, or hold up a stack of your own work at the podium and announce it at length. I don't think it is at all offensive or immodest to make that work discreetly available on a small table at the side of the room, or in a dealer's room, or to end your presentation with a very brief and non-threatening announcement that the merchandise is available.

6. Invest in a badge-making machine and supplies and put some of your very short poems on badges … nice black lettering on handsome bright colors. Put these with your merchandise, give them as gifts, keep them moving. (And by all means expand to teeshirts and coffee mugs if you have the equipment.)

7. Put up a website for your poetry on the Internet. There was a time when this was only for people with lots of money and advanced computer skills, but that time is long past. Today you can find companies that will host your site for $5.00 a month (or even for free, in return for letting them put ads on your site), and they will walk you through the construction process. It's painless and it's cheap, and it's one of the best possible ways to promote your work.

8. Do everything you can to promote science fiction poetry as a whole. You don't have to do this out of altruism—it's simply good business. The more public acceptance there is of the idea that science fiction poetry is a Good Thing Much To Be Desired, the more publications will open up to science fiction poetry. And the more editors will feel that if they use science fiction poetry they should pay for it. More niches will open up in the area of contests and grants and jobs. In the long run, this means a greater potential for you personally, as well as for the genre. If people ask you to give talks, do it. If you are part of a convention, volunteer to do a poetry thing. If your town has a coffeehouse (or something similar), organize a poetry reading—if it doesn't, try the public library. If you see a science fiction poem in a publication, send a note to the editor saying that you're glad it appeared and that you'd like to see

more of the same. Create a need and fill it.

9. Join the Science Fiction Poetry Association. If you don't like the SFPA, find a similar group and join that one. If you can't find anything that suits you, start your own group. People who are involved with science fiction poetry, and who are in a position to ask you to submit poems or participate in poetry events or enter competitions or be part of readings, can't do any of those things if they don't know you exist.

10. If you read well and have access to decent recording equipment, make a poetry tape or CD. The cost of duplicating and boxing and labeling ten good quality voice-only tapes or CDs at this writing is roughly $20.00; how much less depends primarily on what quantity you buy your supplies in. Assume a conservative estimate—assume it costs you $2.50 to produce one tape or CD, and you sell them for $10.00 each—you have quadrupled your money and furthered your reputation at the same time.

11. Finally, if you write metered and rhymed verse, consider writing some science fiction songs. The "filksong" (science fiction music with lyrics) movement is very popular; almost every science fiction convention has filksinging sessions in the evening. Write science fiction poems for existing traditional melodies if you don't want to (or can't) write your own. This is an excellent way to promote your work, especially if you are a competent performer with a pleasant voice (or can find one to perform your songs for you, which isn't difficult.)

I realize there are poets who find the very idea of doing things like this repulsive, and "commercial," and worse. That's fine; they need not do them. I realize that a good poet is a national treasure, and should be revered the way a great artist or musician is revered. I realize that a good poet ought to be able to devote all his or her time to writing poems, at a satisfactory salary, with generous perks and a pension plan thrown in. I do know all that, and I wish things were like that, but they aren't. While we wait for the millennium to arrive and the poet to assume the proper place in our culture, there is no harm in doing what we can to hurry the millennium along.

And if you happen to know someone who can't do any of these things because he or she is painfully shy, or for some other personal reason—but would like to do them—it wouldn't hurt at all to do some of them on that person's behalf, with that person's permission.

Chapter Eight
Poetry Readings, Workshops, and Other Events

Science fiction poetry suffers badly from a lack of publicity, and especially from a lack of *good* publicity. It needs some good solid promotion to build its reputation and get out information about the genre. Anything poets or poetry-lovers can do to help with that will move the cause of science fiction poetry forward. I'm going to describe some possible promotional activities in this chapter, in as much detail as space in this brief handbook allows. I'll be using "science fiction convention" as a cover term; however, the event could also be a book fair, an academic conference, a local Magnolia Festival, or other public gathering.

At a Science Fiction Convention

First, you need a space and a time. Contact the Program Committee running the convention, well in advance of the convention date. Ordinarily a convention books an entire hotel/motel, or a vast portion of same, and in among the booked rooms will be one or two small ones that aren't scheduled for anything. Ask for one of these, since you can be sure your audience will be small. (Unless, of course, you have Bradbury and Le Guin reading, or something similar—in that situation, they'll give you a big room and you'll be able to fill it.) Ideally your event would be three hours long, with a break in the middle for refreshments; if you have a shorter time period, which is usually the case, don't take a break —just tell people to feel free to leave the room and return if they need to do so.

Now you have the space and time, and you have the microphone.

(You do need the microphone, unless the room is only 8 by 10. Nothing is more boring than poetry read aloud so softly that it can't be heard.) The next thing you need is a program flyer/handout for the workshop. You want the flyer to be attractive—*fancy* isn't necessary, but it should be pleasant to look at, easy to read, and with all details made clear. Make a stack of copies. Put some of the programs at or near the registration desk (with Program Committee permission), some at the back of your room, and have somebody around to see that people get them as they come in, if possible.

See to it that a copy of your flyer is prominently displayed on or beside the door of the room, so that people going by can see what's happening inside and decide if they want to come in. Have one program in the hands of whoever is moderating the session, so that what happens does match what's written there. If the flyer says Poet X will be reading his/her poems from 10:30 to 11:00, then somebody coming in at 10:30 is entitled to find that going on at that time. Your moderator *has* to keep the events on schedule (which means, of course, allowing some slack in the way you set them up). I often speak at conferences (not SF) where two administrators are scheduled to speak before me, and each has been given ten minutes. There is no such thing on the face of this earth as a ten-minute opening speech by an administrator (much less two administrators in a row trying to outdo one another); generally, it takes longer than ten minutes for them just to introduce some other speaker. By the time the presentation actually starts, we're already running late. Don't make that kind of mistake; always allow the amount of time it ought to take, plus at least five minutes extra for reality time—and then be prepared to stick to that schedule and to do amusing things to fill any empty holes that appear by accident (or by luck).

What should be on the program flyer? If the event is a poetry reading, you list the poets who are scheduled to read, with their time-slots. If there will be an Open Mike slot (a time when *anyone* can show up and read his or her poems), you list the time-slot for that, and any rules and procedures. If it's a workshop, you need something more substantial.

Here's a short list of possible programs …

1. A brief history of science fiction/fantasy poetry, supplemented by a written handout. Nobody wants to hear someone spouting dates and references; they want that kind of thing on a piece of paper that they can look at.

2. Scheduled poetry readings by people whose work is interesting to lis-

ten to, set up so that you have some variety. That is, if you have two people that do rhymed metered sonnets and one wild barbarian yawper, put the yawper *between* the two formalists. (Never put someone totally unknown and totally terrified either first or last. Put that sort of person —who will not be that sort of person forever—between two solid draws, so that people will stick around.) Never set up your readings on the "I don't know how to judge the quality of a poem" basis; if you don't know, find someone who does. Get the people who are actually scheduled as readers to give you copies of the poems they'll be reading, in advance, so that you can suggest an ordering that will be entertaining for the audience.

3. An "open reading" time, when anybody who wants to can read. For this, as for any "hoot," you set up a limit: For example, nobody reads more than three poems, and the three together must not take more than ten minutes; thus, a person with one ten-minute poem reads only one. And stick to that; it's ghastly if you don't. You do this by making up ahead of time a set of cards that say "You have three minutes left" and "You have one minute left" and "You are out of time" and having the moderator put these discreetly before the reader at the appropriate moments. (Some people are highly skilled at "not seeing" the cards; with them, just don't be discreet.) Needless to say, the moderator must have a watch that runs and is accurate.

4. A panel on some subject of general interest to the audience. For instance:

> The Market for SF Poetry
> How to Write SF Poetry
> The SF Poetry of [Poet's Name]
> Why Editors Hate Poetry
> How to Be a Poet and Not Starve
> Basic Poetcraft
> Advanced Poetcraft
> Poetry Grants and Awards and How to Get Them

Choose a panel topic suitable for the audience you expect to have—don't do the "Basic Poetcraft" one if everybody at the event has a Ph.D. in Literature. And vice versa. Choose panelists who are interesting, who can be heard, who are willing to get their act together in advance rather than fake it, and who—if possible—will be a draw.

5. If and only if you have somebody who is really charismatic, can really hold an audience, and all that stuff—an actual talk, solo. If you can get a major science fiction poet who is both interesting and audible to give a talk, terrific. Or if you can get a science fiction editor, also interesting and audible, to talk on why poetry is so hard to sell, terrific. Unless you have this ideal situation, panels are preferable to individual speakers.

A "generic" workshop program might look like this:

9:00-9:30	Introduction and Welcome
9:30-10:30	X, Y, and Z Reading Their Poetry
10:30-10:45	Coffee break
10:45-11:15	Open Poetry Reading (plus where to sign up and what the rules are.)
11:15-noon	Panel on "XXXXX" (plus a list of the panelists)

Or like this:

10:00-10:15	Introduction and Welcome
10:15-11:00	X and Y Reading Their Poetry—OR an Open Mike Reading
11:00-noon	Panel on "XXXX" (plus a list of the panelists)

Never put an open mike reading last on the program. That's not fair. Put it before something that people will want to stick around for, so that everybody doesn't walk out and leave the poets reading to one another and an empty room.

If possible, you should have an exhibit of science fiction poetry stuff —books, magazines, and "poetic artifacts"—at some secure spot in the room for people to look at. Poetic artifacts include the following and whatever else you can think of along the same line: a famous writer's cuff or napkin with a poem on it somewhere, or a piece of a poem; the usual buttons and badges and bumperstickers, either with poetry on them or "Support Your Local SF Poet" or some such thing; original poems and/or limited edition poems, hand-lettered by the poet and signed by the poet, on heavy paper and suitable for framing (or already framed); books and magazines of science fiction poetry autographed by the poet(s); copies of the Rhysling Awards Anthologies; teeshirts with a science fiction poem or poetry slogan silk-screened on them; paperweights made of that transparent resin stuff with a science fiction poem embed-

ded in them. And so on.

Try to arrange for someone in the dealer's room to let you put together an assortment of books, magazines, tapes, and CDs of science fiction poetry, plus poetry artifacts, for sale at said dealer's table. Usually you can find someone who will be willing to do that in exchange for a reasonable percentage of the profit. You won't be needing more than a corner of a table. Try to get your space with a dealer who has books and prints, or perhaps jewelry and art objects, rather than the gamers' tables. Gamers are not usually going to be the same people who are interested in buying signed original sf/fantasy poems.

When You're Not at a Convention …

If you want to do a science fiction poetry workshop that's not tied to a convention, that's also feasible. You can run it all day if you like. If you want to make money (or at least clear your expenses) this is how it's done.

1. Find a local motel or hotel that has adquate conference rooms for rent. Holiday Inns, Ramada Inns, Days Inns, et cetera. You can usually rent a small conference room (long table with executive type chairs around it, blackboard or flip chart, microphone, wet bar and refrigerator, bathroom attached) for 25 people, for $100.00 to $150.00. (It will be more expensive in the heart of the tourist season.) You can rent a full-sized conference room, the kind with all the stuff listed above except bath and wet bar, but with many chairs lined up in rows; the cost of a room like that will depend on its size, the hotel or motel's location, and other factors. Make your arrangements with the staffperson who handles these things; the desk clerk will know who that is.

    For a fee, the motel will bring a coffee/tea/soft drink setup at designated times. They won't let you brown-bag it in their rooms, for obvious reasons; for an arrangement of that kind you need to do your renting at a local YMCA or church or library or similar civic facility. Find out about cancellation privileges—usually you can cancel from 72 hours to five business days prior to the scheduled date. Get all this in writing, including what will be supplied; unless it says in writing that there will be water glasses and pitchers of water and an extension cord there won't be any of those things. (And I recommend bringing your own extension cord, no matter what it says on your agreement.)

2. Get your program together and make a flyer, photocopy as many copies as you need, and make it the kind you can fold up and mail without an envelope. At the bottom of the flyer have a coupon the person mails back to you to reserve a place at the workshop, and make it very clear that nobody will be admitted unless they've reserved their place. Be sure that there's a space on that coupon for their address (both postal and e-mail) and phone number. Mail out your flyers, post them in laundromats, send them to local writers' groups and to nearby colleges and universities and bookstores. Send out as many additional copies by e-mail as is appropriate for your plans and needs.

3. Send press releases to local papers, radio stations, television stations, bookstores, schools, writer's groups, bookstores, and so on. Many will ignore you, but the three or four people you pick up will be worth the investment. Post the press release (and the flyer) on your website; send announcements to any other Net locations for which that's allowed and appropriate.

4. Be sure your flyer (as well as any other informational announcement) has a deadline date after which reservations won't be accepted, and that the date in question is in advance of the last day for you to cancel your reserved room. This way, if you don't get enough registrations to cover your expenses, you take no real risk. You'll be out your time, the cost of the flyers and mailing, and perhaps a small deposit, but the sum won't be large—and it will be a deductible tax loss. Figure out how many registrations you have to have in order to clear expenses (or make a profit, if that's what you're after) and unless you have that many by the deadline, you simply call the motel/hotel and cancel your arrangements. Then you write or call or e-mail the people who did register, explain to them about the cancellation, and apologize, promising to let them know when you reschedule. Keep their contact information for a mailing list when that next time comes around, return their checks, and don't worry about it. This happens. Sometimes it's because you've set up your workshop in competition with some much bigger local event; sometimes it's because of bad weather; sometimes it's just the luck of the draw. It will also happen if the workshop doesn't sound interesting, or if you didn't bother to make sure your publicity material was user-friendly and free of typographical errors.

5. Prepare an interesting and attractive handout, with useful information

that's relevant to your program. This is truly important. Most people like to take away some physical object with them when they leave, and a handout is easy and inexpensive for that purpose.

The big question is of course whether to do a small event or a big one. Do you want 100 people at $10.00 each or 25 people at $30.00 each? Do you want an all day or a half day event? What do you call it? Do you have a reduced rate for students and seniors and the disabled? (Yes, if possible … and be certain your room is accessible to the handicapped or that you've made arrangements to make it so for the duration of the event.) You are the only one who can make these decisions, and you should make them on the basis of your goals, your budget, and your experience. If you haven't done this sort of thing before, start small.

If the profit you might make is not a major concern for you, donating the money taken in after expenses to a charity, nonprofit organization, or something of the kind is an excellent idea. It will build goodwill for poets and poetry, and will set a useful precedent for future events; furthermore, people may attend who would not do so if the money went directly to you.

I do a lot of workshops and seminars (and used to do more, when I wasn't so busy). I do them on a variety of subjects; there's no reason why you can't do one on science fiction poetry writing and publishing. You'll need more advance planning and publicity if you try a program like that described for a convention, but it can still be done—especially if you're able to draft somebody with a Big Name to come by in exchange for expenses and a small honorarium (which you then add to your budget) and either read poems or give a talk.

One warning—be sure you know what you're doing, if you try one of these all on your lonesome. The experience of being shut up in a room with 24 people who've paid you to provide them with several hours of something-or-other worth what they paid, and then not being able to deliver, is excruciating. Word will get around, and nobody will ever sign up for your events again. If you're boring and you know it, or if you're shy, or if you're no good at thinking on your feet—if people try to escape from you when you want to talk to them—don't do this. Get a friend who is charismatic and capable to do it with you, and split both expenses and proceeds. Stay out of that person's hair and let him/her run the workshop. After watching your partner a time or two you may find that you can do it solo after all.

It's well worth it, by the way, to do two or three of these events at just-barely-break-even rates or for free, in order to get the word out that you can present something worth going to and to establish your relation-

ship with the space and staff you want to work with. Workshops are one of the ways to Be A Poet And Not Starve; I have in the past done well giving workshops on How To Put On Workshops.

If you have the necessary equipment and skill, I recommend taping a reading or workshop that lends itself to taping (either audio or video). If the tape is good, and if everyone involved is willing to give you the necessary written permission, you'll then have a tape that you can sell copies of at later poetry events. And even a tape that you can't sell is worth having as a part of your archives; you never know when it may be exactly what you need for a class you're teaching, or for some similar occasion. Be very sure, though, that you do get the written permissions.

Other Options

In addition to readings and workshops, or when you can't get a room, there are other things you can do. For example …

1. Find somebody really good who will write a science fiction poem for people on demand, on a subject of their choice, and sign it, for a dollar or two—roughly like having somebody who does quick caricatures.

2. Find somebody really good who will critique other people's poems and offer suggestions on how to fix them, for fifty cents a poem or something equally ludicrous. A booth with a sign reading "Walk-Up Science Fiction Poetry Clinic, Get Your Poems Repaired Here," staffed as much of the time as you can manage, is a good idea. People like to have their poems thoroughly overhauled, in approximate privacy. (Whoever does this must be skilled, patient, and tactful.)

3. Reserve space in the art show, and organize a display of hand-lettered poems signed by the poets, matted or framed the way drawings or paintings are matted or framed.

If enough of these things happen, and if they go moderately well, we might see a day arrive when people who go to conventions would complain if there aren't any scheduled poetry events, and when people would call or e-mail their local poets to find out when their next poetry event was going to be held. That's the goal.

Chapter Nine
A Brief History of the SFPA

If the Science Fiction Poetry Association (SFPA) were an academic organization, or a business association, or had been run from the beginning by meticulously well-organized people with lots of free time, this chapter would have a predictable form. There would be exact dates and names and facts; there'd be a list of all the officers and editors and their terms of office and their accomplishments; there'd be a detailed account of the various versions of *Star*Line* as the official publication of SFPA; and so on and so on. If I tried to write something like that, however, it would have to be science fiction, if not fantasy. SFPA has never been like that, and perhaps never will be. What follows, therefore, is a rough account based on my own recollections and those of other longtime members, intended only to explain how the SFPA got from there (1978) to here (2004).

When I founded the SFPA in 1978, I had very broad reasons and very narrow goals. I had noticed that people interested in science fiction poetry seemed isolated; at conventions, you saw them all alone in isolated corners reading strange-looking publications or scribbling on tiny scraps of paper. I had a vague general idea that I should do something to at least make it possible for them to identify one another and stay in touch, such as starting a science fiction poetry organization and providing it with a modest newsletter.

This didn't strike me as a large or difficult task. I was sure that I'd be doing well if I could rustle up 25 members and keep 20 of them longer than a year. I was at that time a busy assistant professor at a large California campus (not the kind where the prof only sees two graduate seminars, each containing four people); I had five children at home and a house to run; I was moonlighting in various ways on the side; and I had a writing career to see to. It seemed to me that I could just barely manage the amount of correspondence and interaction that would be needed for a 25-member organization with a mimeographed newsletter stapled in one corner for mailing. And from that position of ignorance, I wrote a first issue, called it *Star*Line*, ran off fifty copies, sent them out to likely candidates, and waited.

I was wrong on all counts, of course. In the first place, the amount of work necessary for a 25-member SFPA, with a newsletter that published and reviewed poetry as well as fulfilling service functions, was far too much for any one person to do unless it was the only work they were doing. I had never suspected that. In the second place, there turned out to be far more than 25 willing and energetic members; 150 to 200 was the accurate number. Very soon, even with the publication of *Star*Lin*e held to every other month, I found myself in serious trouble and contemplating closing the whole thing back down.

The SFPA was saved by Maureen Kaplan and artist Karen Jollie, who simply stepped in and took all the work off my hands. They did the production, the assembly, the mailing, the record-keeping, the accounts, the art—everything except writing (and typing) the material, and editing—on a completely volunteer basis and with never a word of complaint. They not only did it willingly, they did it superbly well, and I am more than happy to tell you that it was bliss.

From within that context of bliss, a lot of work got done. I found a volunteer (author Elizabeth Chater) who was willing to serve as our first President on the condition that she would have no official duties except appointing a replacement should she ever decide she didn't want to continue to serve. I wrote a Constitution & Bylaws of the vaguest and most informal kind, and offered to send a copy out to any member who wanted to see it (no one did), and I declared it approved on that basis. SFPA established an annual award for the best short science fiction poem (up to 49 lines) and the best long one (50 lines or more) of each year. With Robert Heinlein's kind permission, it was called the Rhysling Award (pronounced "Riseling") after the Blind Singer of the Spaceways in *The Green Hills of Earth*. SFPA members may nominate one poem in each category, and the nominated poems are published in an annual

Rhysling Anthology with a ballot enclosed. This means that when SFPA members vote for a Rhysling Award they have had the opportunity to read all of the nominated works; the only exception has been in rare instances when we could not obtain permission to reprint a particular poem. The winning poems have appeared most years in the Science Fiction Writers of America's *Nebula Awards Showcase*. The list of Rhysling winners and their winning poems appears at the end of this handbook.

SFPA also began an active campaign to establish science fiction poetry as a valid genre and to open markets for it. Those of us who attended science fiction conventions and writing conferences (or any other appropriate function) put on poetry panels and readings and workshops as often as anyone would let us. We took samples of *Star*Line* with us to public meetings and displayed them, to get the word out; we held SFPA meetings and room parties and invited anyone interested to attend. We wrote letters to the editors of science fiction publications asking that they begin carrying poetry if they did not already do so; we doggedly submitted science fiction poetry even to editors who gave us only tepid and tentative maybes. A number of our members published science fiction poetry journals of their own, and poetry collections and chapbooks of their own; some of our members received grants to carry out projects in science fiction poetry. We produced a cassette tape of members reading their own poems and offered it for sale.

We also worked to convince the Science Fiction Writers of America—a much more formal and structured organization, with all the traditional bells and whistles—that science fiction poetry was a legitimate medium for becoming a member of SFWA. You can imagine the problems with that idea. It's one thing to claim that three science fiction sonnets sold to respectable paying publications are equivalent to three science fiction short stories published in similar venues by Gregory Benford or Nalo Hopkinson; it's quite another thing to prove it. Very briefly, we got it done, but it didn't last; science fiction poems, no matter where they are published, are no longer considered relevant as sole qualifications for SFWA.

We are not going to see a science fiction poetry equivalent of *Paradise Lost* on the best seller lists in my lifetime—although I have lived to see the publication of book-length science fiction poetry, and that is definitely progress. But thanks to the hard work and cooperation of all our members, SFPA has brought science fiction poetry out of those isolated corners I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter. We now have a community of science fiction poets and a forum (three forums, now that there's also a website and a listserv) where they can communicate

with one another.

Meanwhile, back to the history … A time came when I found myself unable, even with so much help, to maintain the standards of service to which SFPA members were entitled. And along came another rescuer, in the person of poet and editor Robert Frazier. I was then and am now deeply grateful to him for taking over my duties, with almost no notice, when I so badly needed his help. In 1986, after a year assisting Bob, Elissa Malcohn accepted the post of *Star*Line* editor, and Bob stayed on a year to help her. When she retired, Bob returned as newsletter editor from mid-1988 to mid-1991. Over the years he had help from poets Gene Van Troyer and Bruce Boston. Others who have served as editor include J.C. and Barb Hendee, David C. Kopsaka -Merkel, Tim Pratt and Marge Simon, who had the job for five years in the 1990s and has taken up the reins again. There have been bumps and joggles from time to time, especially in periods of editorial transition, but *Star*Line* is alive and well, and the SFPA is more activethan ever before.

Through all of this, *Star*Line* (assisted in recent years by the SFPA website) has remained vigorous, serving not only as a steady forum for poetry and articles about poetry but also as an information clearing-house on every aspect of the science fiction poetry genre. The letters columns have not been just lively, they have been passionate; and many issues have been wrangled there at the top of our collective lungs.

The SFPA has always been an informally structured organization, dedicated to keeping bureaucracy, and the trappings of bureaucracy, to an absolute minimum. Our first president was Elizabeth Chater; the office was then accepted by Gene Wolfe. In years that followed, there often wasn't a titular president, but Bob Frazier kept things running. In 1992, poet and artist Marge Simon took up the presidency. During her tenure, a formal SFPA constitution was drafted and the organization gave its first Grand Master Award, to Bruce Boston. Poet Scott Green took over in 2001. At the time of this writing, the President is poet and editor Mike Allen.

We have mostly made do without committees and caucuses and codicils, thus far, and I cannot see that that has held us back. The amount of money that science fiction poets are paid has saved us from needing tax accountants, grievance committees, audits, or people to see that our assets are properly invested. This proves that there are some advantages to publishing works that earn from nothing at all to perhaps $50.00; very few forms have to be filled out, and which money market fund to turn to is the least of our worries.

The SFPA is now 26 years old, and has survived and grown and made

much progress toward its goals. We would welcome your membership and your participation, as it continues to grow.

How to Join the SFPA

See the SFPA website for current information and to join online. Dues include award nominating and voting privileges, issues of Star*Line, SFPA's quarterly journal, and the annual Rhysling and Dwarf Stars anthologies. Inexpensive .pdf memberships are now available:
http://www.sfpoetry.com/join.html

References And Suggested Readings

[*Note:* This is an informational bibliography, and is not intended to be comprehensive or complete. In particular, there are hundreds of fine chapbooks and small-press poetry collections that I haven't seen and am simply unaware of. The list below is here to give you an overview of the range of material available, and to help you find resources for further reading.]

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———. The Ultimate Science Fiction Poetry Guide. [Online at http://www.magicdragon.com/UltimateSF/sfpo.html] [Not complete, but very detailed, with a great deal of information.]

Science Fiction Poetry Magazines

[The list below is restricted to publications that publish only science fiction poetry and related information such as science fiction poetry reviews, articles on science fiction poetics, market listings, and the like. A list of other publications in the genre that publish occasional poetry is available at the SFPA website (http://www.sfpoetry.com) and in the usual market listing sources.]

Astropoetica, website edited by Emily Gaskin; e-mail, editor@astropoetica.com. [Online at http://www.astropoetica.com]

Dreams and Nightmares, edited by David C. Kopaska-Merkel; 1300 Kicker Road, Tuscaloosa, AL 35404. E-mail, dragontea@earthlink.net. [Online at http://home.earthlink.net/~dragontea/index.html]

Illumen, edited by Tyree Campbell and Erin Donahoe; PO Box 782, Cedar Rapids, IA 52406-0782. E-mail, illumensdp@yahoo.com. [Online at http://www.samsdotpublishing.com]

*Mythic Delirium***,** edited by Mike Allen; P.O Box 13511, Roanoke VA

24034-3511. E-mail, mythicd2001@yahoo.com. [Online at http://www.mythicdelirium. com]

*Star*Line*, edited by Marge Simon; 1412 NE 35th St., Ocala FL 34479. E-mail, SFPASL@aol.com. [Online at http://www.sfpoetry.com]

The Magazine of Speculative Poetry, edited by Roger Dutcher, P.O. Box 564, Beloit WI 53512. E-mail, sfpoetry@yahoo.com. [Online at http://www.sff.net/people/Roger-Dutcher/#msp]

THE RHYSLING RECORD

1978

Long Poem
Gene Wolfe: The Computer Iterates the Greater Trumps

Short Poem (tie)
Duane Ackerson: The Starman
Sonya Dorman: Corruption of Metals
Andrew Joron: Asleep in the Arms of Mother Night

1979

Long Poem
Michael Bishop: For the Lady of a Physicist

Short Poem (tie)
Duane Ackerson: Fatalities
Steve Eng: Storybooks and Treasure Maps

1980

Long Poem

Andrew Joron: The Sonic Flowerfall of Primes

Short Poem (tie)
Robert Frazier: Encased in the Amber of Eternity
Peter Payack: The Migration of Darkness

1981

Long Poem
Thomas M. Disch: On Science Fiction

Short Poem
Ken Duffin: Meeting Place

1982

Long Poem
Ursula K. Le Guin: The Well of Baln

Short Poem
Raymond DiZazzo: On the Speed of Sight

1983

Long Poem
Adam Cornford: Your Time and You: A Neoprole's Dating Guide

Short Poem
Alan P. Lightman: In Computers

1984

Long Poem
Joe Haldeman: Saul's Death: Two Sestinas

Short Poem
Helen Ehrlich: Two Sonnets

1985

Long Poem
Siv Cedering: A Letter from Caroline Herschel

Short Poem
Bruce Boston: For Spacers Snarled in the Hair of Comets

1986

Long Poem
Andrew Joron: Shipwrecked on Destiny Five

Short Poem
Susan Palwick: The Neighbor's Wife

1987

Long Poem
W. Gregory Stewart: Daedalus

Short Poem (tie)
Jonathan V. Post: Before the Big Bang: News from the Hubble Large Space Telescope
John Calvin Rezmerski: A Dream of Heredity

1988

Long Poem
Lucius Shepard: White Trains

Short Poem (tie)
Bruce Boston: The Nightmare Collector
Suzette Haden Elgin: Rocky Road to Hoe

1989

Long Poem (tie)
Bruce Boston: In the Darkened Hours
John M. Ford: Winter Solstice, Camelot Station

Short Poem
Robert Frazier: Salinity

1990

Long Poem
Patrick McKinnon: dear spacemen

Short Poem
G. Sutton Breiding: Epitaph for Dreams

1991

Long Poem
David Memmott: The Aging Cryonicist in the Arms of His Mistress Contemplates the Survival of the Species While the Phoenix Is Consumed by Fire

Short Poem
Joe Haldeman: Eighteen Years Old, October Eleventh

1992

Long Poem
W. Gregory Stewart: the button and what you know

Short Poem
David Lunde: Song of the Martian Cricket

1993

Long Poem
William J. Daciuk: To Be from Earth

Short Poem
Jane Yolen: Will

1994

Long Poem
W. Gregory Stewart and Robert Frazier: Basement Flats: Redefining the Burgess Shale

Short Poem (tie)
Bruce Boston: Spacer's Compass
Jeff VanderMeer: Flight Is for Those Who Have Not Yet Crossed Over

1995

Long Poem
David Lunde: Pilot, Pilot

Short Poem
Dan Raphael: Skin of Glass

1996

Long Poem
Margaret B. Simon: Variants of the Obsolete

Short Poem
Bruce Boston: Future Present: A Lesson in Expectation

1997

Long Poem
Terry A. Garey: Spotting UFOs While Canning Tomatoes

Short Poem
W. Gregory Stewart: Day Omega

1998

Long Poem
Laurel Winter: why goldfish shouldn't use power tools

Short Poem
John Grey: Explaining Frankenstein to His Mother

1999

Long Poem
Bruce Boston: Confessions of a Body Thief

Short Poem
Laurel Winter: egg horror poem

2000

Long Poem
Geoffrey A. Landis: Christmas (after we all get time machines)
Short Poem
Rebecca Marjesdatter: Grimoire

2001

Long Poem
Joe Haldeman: January Fires

Short Poem
Bruce Boston: My Wife Returns as She Would Have It

2002

Long Poem
Lawrence Schimel: How to Make a Human

Short Poem
William John Watkins: We Die as Angels

2003

Long Poem (tie)
Charles Saplak and Mike Allen: Epochs in Exile: A Fantasy Trilogy
Sonya Taaffe: Matlacihuatl's Gift
Short Poem
Ruth Berman: Potherb Gardening

2004

Long Poem
Theodora Goss: Octavia Is Lost in the Hall of Masks

Short Poem
Roger Dutcher: Just Distance