

# A Journey to Poetry of Geometrical Shapes from the Ancient Time to Poetry of John Hollander

Mehrdad Moazami Goudarzi<sup>1\*</sup>, Leila Baradaran Jamili<sup>2</sup> and Bahman Zarrinjooee<sup>2</sup>

1- MA Student, Postgraduate Department of English Language and Literature, College of Humanities, Boroujerd Branch, Islamic Azad University, Boroujerd, Iran

2- Assistant Professor of Postgraduate Department of English Language and Literature, College of Humanities, Boroujerd Branch, Islamic Azad University, Boroujerd, Iran

**Corresponding author:** Mehrdad Moazami Goudarzi

**ABSTRACT:** The paper investigates the relationship between geometrical pattern poetry and John Hollander's poetry (1929–2013) and the way by which the meaning is transformed through the specific geometrical shapes. Pattern poetry, as a subcategory of literary art, mixes together the literal and pictorial components to create poems including an aesthetic entity. To comprehend a piece of pattern poem, the readers observe the poem as well as hear it. According to George Puttenham (1529-90), Marcia Birken (1954- ) and Anne Coon (1952- ), geometrical pattern poetry—owning a considerable geometrical element such as plane, labyrinth, geometry and math figures—is of those poems involving geometrical shapes and figures. They divide pattern poems into different mathematical and geometrical categories and if a poem enters into their category, it is a pattern poem, unless it cannot be counted as geometrical poem. Hollander is one of the modern poets whose poems are considered as pattern poetry. He was under the influence of geometry and mathematics and this influence led him to write poems that are in accordance with the geometrical rules. When one reads his poems, it seems that he/she is involved in a geometrical labyrinth or maze and the way-out or the solution must be found through the formulas related to geometry; hence, Hollanderian Pattern Poetry can be categorized as geometrical poems.

**Keywords:** Geometry, Mathematics, Labyrinth, Pattern Poetry, Hollanderian Pattern Poetry.

## INTRODUCTION

Pattern poetry has got a long lifetime along with different cultures, nations, and periods. Even its history can be considered as long as the history of literature and all the nations who had a hand in literature started their literary careers with pattern poetry. The notion of visual or pattern poetry (sometimes referred to as concrete poetry) has its roots from the time of Greece and Roman Empire. The narrow histories of the ancestral visual poetry types and genres more often are centered on Western European traditions perhaps with nods to the Mediterranean Basin. The primary ancestors considered the variety of visual poems surviving from Greek, Latin, other Western European languages and perhaps Hebrew. As Karl Kempton writes "there may be a gesture or more to Egyptian hieroglyphics because of the impact of ancient Egyptian culture on popular Western European culture" (2). In fact, the elongated and long history of pattern poetry is the wish and desire of man in order to manipulate the visual and literary concepts and to link the knowledge and understanding of these two zones together to create an artistic and aesthetic unity. Shape or concrete poetry has no representation in only one location or even era, but it is more a kind of "maze within a maze covered over with obscurity, an attempt which recurs century after century to make the synthesis, in almost every Western literature and many Eastern ones" (Higgins, 3).

One of the initial recognized pieces of pattern poetry is one consisting of two manuscripts on the faces of the Phaistos Disk—"a disk of fired clay from the Minoan palace of Phaistos" (*Britannica*, 2014)—on the Greek island of Crete, possibly dating to the middle or late Minoan Bronze Age (2nd millennium BC) which is about 15 cm (5.9 in) in diameter and covered on both sides with a spiral of stamped symbols—which is in the Heraklion Museum. The main stream kept its routine and there were some other pattern or shape poems with the subjects such as

religion and praising of the emperors—the poets such as African Optatian, whose poems were in the form of eulogies and in praises of Constantine the Great—until it became the time of Medieval Literature. There were some works such as “a carmen cancellatum” by Boniface Winifried (680-755), a poem on the subject of a cross written by historian Paul the Deacon (720-799), other poems coming from the period of Carolingian—pertaining to the Frankish dynasty that ruled France and Germany during the 8th to 10th centuries AD—by Alcuin, and another poem written by Josephus Scottus (? - 804) who was Charlemagne's private teacher in ninth century. In his book, *Pattern Poetry: Guide to an Unknown Literature*, Dick Higgins writes, “they are joyful meditations covering the principal points of the Christian faith as Hrabanus saw them” (7).

The first part of this paper refers to an explanation of Hollander's geometrical poetry and the new way he has brought into the realm of poetry. Then by the help of the critics, such as Puttenham, Birken and Coon, the formula of geometrical poetry is to be clarified; i.e., a poem is considered as geometrical poem if all the features (such as the shape, length, number of words, number of lines, thickness of lines and so on) they have enumerated will fix the poem. Furthermore, the selected poems (“Swan and Shadow,” “Graven Image,” “Crise De Coeur,” and “Old Mazda Lamp”) are discussed through the lenses of geometrical poetry.

### MATERIALS AND METHODS

Poetry will go beyond the common routine of literature when the poets focus on the *visual* characteristics of the works they compose. Approximately for more than centuries, many poets have considered the bodily planning of alphabetical letters and words as very essential dimensions in writing poetry, whether the words and the letters are drawn or painted by hand, typed by type machines, or computerized. These availabilities in the form of composing poetry open up a new way for the poets to create pieces of poems that have many characteristics in common with mathematics and especially geometry. Birken and Coon write that “some pattern poems have also taken on familiar conventional forms, such as the cross, the altar, and the egg. George Puttenham, a contemporary of William Shakespeare (1564-1616), provided Elizabethans with guidelines (fig 3) for using *geometric shapes* in poetry” (9). Therefore, in poetry and significantly in pattern poetry, if one searches for signs of geometrical poetry, he should be in search of finding basic geometrical shapes illustrated in the following picture:

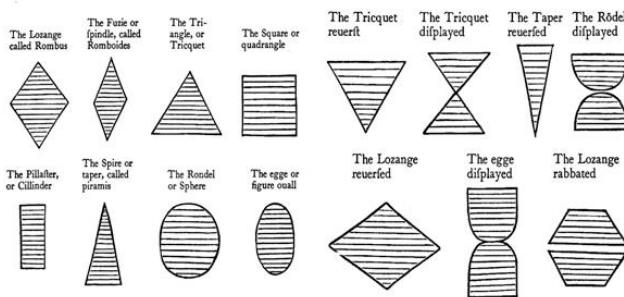


Figure 3. Possible Geometric Shapes in Poetry

In *The Arte of English Poesie*, Puttenham states that, “[i]t is said by such as professe[d] the Mathematical[!] sciences, that all things stand by proportion, and that without it nothing could stand to be good or beautiful” (64). He also adds that “proportion Poetical[!]” rests in five qualities: staff (or stanza), measure (or meter), concord (or rhyme), situation (or placement of rhyme), and figure, or what he considers as the “ocular representation” (Puttenham, 65). Puttenham believes that there are many important elements for a poet while composing a poem, but the most important one in writing a geometrical poem is the last which is ocular representation—of or pertaining to the eyes or eyesight or visual sense. It means that a geometrical poem should follow at least one of the geometrical shapes in the picture. In figure 3, there are some single shapes that are geometrically considered as basic shapes such as square, circle, oval, and so on, while there are other shapes that are mixtures or combinations of the basic and regular figures, including triangles and quadrilaterals.

### RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The development of pattern poetry continues to the 19th and 20th centuries when we have the poets such as E. E. Cummings (1894-1962) with his best-known poem “r-p-o-p-h-e-s-s-a-g-r” (“grasshopper” for the uninitiated), which releases the impatient vigor of the grasshopper. Maybe the most distinguished figure of 20th century pattern poetry

is John Hollander who has published the collection *Types of Shape* (1969), where poems are shaped and decorated very similar to Pastoral shapes of Ancient Greek figures and poems to narrate their topics, themes, contents and stories in the cover of a poem. Possibly, the widely recognized and known poem among Hollander's poems is the mirrored "Swan and Shadow"—referring to a kind of imitation for the image of a swan and its shadow in the water (fig. 1)—and the geometrical shape poem "Graven Image"—referring to the picture of a star that is shining from very far away (fig. 2).

Dusk  
 Above the  
 water hang the  
 loud  
 flies  
 here  
 O so  
 gray  
 then  
 What  
 When  
 Where  
 In us

A pale signal will appear  
 Soon before its shadow fades  
 Here in this pool of opened eye  
 No upon us As at the very edges  
 of where we take shape in the dark air  
 this object has its image awakening  
 ripples of recognition that will  
 brush darkness up into light

even after this bird this hour both drift by atop the perfect sad instant now  
 already passing out of sight  
 toward yet-untroubled reflection  
 this image bears its object darkening  
 into memorial shades Scattered bits of  
 light No of water Or something across  
 water Breaking up No Being regathered  
 soon Yet by then a swan will have  
 gone  
 pale  
 hush  
 of a  
 place  
 past  
 sudden dark as  
 if a swan  
 sang

Figure 1. "Swan and Shadow"

A  
 bit  
 of an  
 image a  
 hint only  
 a momentary  
 flit like a  
 barely-tinged  
 purpose possibly

thrusting a dark shining horn through the distant water These  
 should plunge one into the deeps of significance where tall  
 forms stand for their maker while tides throo vast beyond  
 dreaming even overhead Craving the rich dark icons ever  
 denied us one day I drew upon the flat wet sand above  
 the sense of Tony comparing this landscape which  
 with the broad memorials feathered wings was all  
 the symbol we were permitted but far from the  
 water of summer the sea I would gaze at the  
 wren equilateral on the symposia wall at  
 the hex feet their members joined arms locked  
 in legs all fondly wrought and standing for and  
 on the wall unshelving be it in blue or yellow O a  
 flat erdge about a blank but as a coupling of these  
 identicals used so as to seem at war how much a sign of  
 love Even here though the image dives down into the wider  
 pert to vanish into meaning Here too in my crude making the  
 and the remembered part before darkness marks a point of love

Let there be only  
 this final sign  
 this triangle  
 of the dark  
 about thy  
 opening  
 lower  
 own  
 v

Figure 2. "Graven Image"

John Hollander, who lived in Woodbridge, Connecticut, was a judge for numerous competitions on recitation, and later he said that he enjoyed a lot when he was working with students on their poetry and teaching it. He put an emphasis on the fact that in reading poetry, the most important element is to hear poems out loud as well as to see them in a pictorial form. In this regard, he says that "A good poem satisfies the ear. It creates a story or picture that grabs you, informs you and entertains you" (qtd. in Wolfe, 3). He had also a great interest in translations from Yiddish language using pictorial alphabets. Hollander typically scripted his poems on a computer, but if there was no way to spring up his inspiration, he stated that, "I've been known to start poems on napkins and scraps of paper, too" (ibid). His good sense of geometry led him to be a poet who mostly wished to manipulate geometry and literature to each other. He was also well-talented in drawing pictures and shapes that were geometrically balanced. Furthermore, Karl Kirchwey, a modern poet, was under the influence of Hollander and studied under Hollander at Yale University. He was also skilled at writing geometrical poems which might be the reason of Hollander's teachings. Hollander trained him that "it was possible to build a life around the task of writing poetry" and especially geometrical pattern poetry (qtd. in Swansburg, 5). Kirchwey explains Hollander's excitement and passion of poetry as, "Since he is a poet himself [...] he conveyed a passion for that knowledge as a source of current inspiration" (ibid). Therefore, Hollander's poetry has the passion and excitement of literature in all its parts amongst them the part of visual appearance is the most deliberate one.

**Geometry in Hollanderian Pattern Poetry**

Hollander's poetry is not far from such a description of geometrical poetry. He manipulates many shapes and forms to create poems with clear geometrical shapes such as circle, heart, column, square and the mixture of them that convey the visual representation of their meanings. An obvious example of Hollander's use of such a geometrical technique is to be found on his poem named "Crise De Coeur" which is a geometrical poem that illustrates the heart of human being. The poem is the story of a heart being narrated by the heart itself; the way how it is narrating the miserable story of its life and begs the help from the listener of the poem. All five elements of Puttenham including staff (or stanza), measure (or meter), concord (or rhyme), situation (or placement of rhyme), as well as ocular representations (or figures) are considered by Hollander in composing this poem:

```

Help me
  O help me for only
    a brief while ago I hung red
    and yet erect in the world of wide
      white reticent backgrounds against which
        I registered. Correctly placed as if painting
          out a direction downwards towards which all must
            fall. I stood firm. I bent out the cut time which we
              always hope we have to count on. More surely than as an
                emblem cut into a thin-sliced tree transcribed by a dart
                  perhaps I shone and signified being all crimson and bearded
                    as I was and near-in to the promiscuous scarlet pipe of cards
                      I was unyielding and if conventional, then surely constant and as
                        I stood in my round-shouldered pride you struck. Some fell dupes
                          seized me as if for a moment the surface I clung to had gone blank
                            like that. As if a glimpse of folded arm or breast or thigh curved
                              under itself plunging deep into its own shadow had unhung me quite
                                Or as if some loss as of dry leaves blown across marble corridors
                                  was felt for an instant even while unseen I fell tripping over a
                                    minute lapse in life's surface I fell heavily and indeed flipped
                                      over and now I lie bleeding on my sheet a sick vaseline who
                                        shorts of breath can barely sigh. Ah. BMB. before I fell. For
                                          even the shirt while that will be forever lying here I
                                            have blackened nose and pale. Yet recognizable for
                                              what I am and unable to less I rest. uneasy. Fever
                                                seems me up towards evening. After failure of
                                                  nerve has made a noon too bright to bear
                                                    bringing in place of sleep a sense
                                                      of something wrong something
                                                        half-remembered like
                                                          a heart

```

Figure 4. "Crise De Coeur"

An important feature of geometry is that the shapes are of very regular and similar pattern of drawing. If the poet, for example, is drawing a heart, there should be a balance and similarity between two parts of the heart. The lines should be the same both in length and thickness. When writing a geometrical poem, the poet should create a kind of balance and harmony between parts and whole; it means the number of the words and the lengths of the lines have got outstanding importance. In composing geometrical poems, the poet should follow the same procedure as he is drawing geometrical shapes. In the above picture, man can see that the poem is fully geometrical and Hollander can deliberately express his own idea of suffering of heart in the form of geometry and shapes. The rhymes and the meters are in balance with each other and even the number of the words used is counted and they are the same in the symmetrical lines. For instance, in the first line there are two words and till the last line the balance is repeated and it has two words. Moreover, the poem consists of thirty-one lines which fifteen of them are in the upper part and the other fifteen are in the lower part. There is one line which acts like a symmetrical borderline that halves the poem into two similar pieces.

A geometrical poem, therefore, to some extent should have its own self-reflective image within both its shape and content. There are some words in "Crise De Coeur," that are considered as the pictorial word itself (in the first half) and the shadow of the same words in the second half of the poem. This is perceived through reading the poem, while considering the symmetrical line to divide the poem into two parts. In line 16 of the poem, which is a dividing tool for the poet, Hollander shows both geometrical symmetry of the shape and the shadow of the reflected words. Hollander writes:

I stood in my round-shouldered pride you struck Some fell impulse seized me as if for a moment the surface I clung to had blank like that As if a glimpse of folded arm or breast or thigh curved under itself plunging deep into its own shadow had unhung me quite Or as if some loss as of dry leaves blown across marble corridors (Line, 14-18)

These lines indicate that while having a symmetrical balance and harmony, the labyrinth or maze would be more clear and easier to be solved when one considers the words as the opposites for each other. When there is symmetry, the reflection of the words is more perceptible and tangible. In line 15, the word 'surface' is mirrored and matched to the word 'deep' in line 17 in terms of both geometrical symmetry and meaning symmetry. Moreover, the words 'light' and 'shadow'; 'seized' and 'unhung' and so forth have the same mirror-like reflection harmonizing the poem structurally and unifying the readers' mind with whatever in the mind of the poet.

In the poem, there are also many other words used by Hollander being related to mathematical and geometrical structures and vocabularies which describe or draw attractive geometrical shapes to add not only the beauties of meaning, but also the truth beyond them. The words have their own exceptional meanings in geometry and the equivalent meaning is well thought-out by the poet to convey the same message in the body of poetry. Instances of these geometrical words consist of 'erect' (line, 4) meaning to be straight, 'wide' (line, 4) meaning to be extended, 'point' meaning the small measurement used to measure font size, 'curve' (line, 16) meaning being bend, and 'half' (line, 30) meaning one part of two equal parts. Composing such lines of "Crise De Coeur," Hollander contemplates himself to be a mathematician and geometrician rather than to be only a poet; thus, this poem is a geometrical one forming the view point of shape and meaning.

Marcia Birken and Anne C. Coon, in their book *Discovering Patterns in Mathematics and Poetry*, state that "[i]t is important to remember that Puttenham's diagram was not intended to be a guide to mathematicians, but a help for poets," and they add "Puttenham provides many illustrations of how the geometric forms may be used by poets" (98). Puttenham's attitude toward poetry and the geometrical poetry sparks a very sharp light in the mind of great poets who compose shape poems in a more deliberate way near to geometrical shapes. Approximately, fifty years after he

expressed such a guideline, “Easter Wings” as one of the most well-known pattern poems in English was written by George Herbert (1593-1633) who planned two head-to-head triangles in a way that it seems to be two wings fasten to each other. The poem can be seen both vertically and horizontally.

Based on such an idea, the diagram—Birken and Coon specialize it only for poets—is highly considered by Hollander in his poem, especially the one named “Old Mazda Lamp,” which follows at least two basic geometrical shapes including the Roundel or Sphere and the Cylinder. In order to write such a poem, Hollander uses two geometrical shapes and manipulates them to create a lamp-shaped poem:

```

On or
off Either darkness
unlocked again or feigned
daylight perhaps graded only by
stepped intensities fifty watts apart
In any event no continuities like those
of flickering no nor even of fading Flick
Click and there it is suddenly Oh yes I see
Indeed A mind hung brilliantly upon filaments
stung by some untongued brightness opening up
also encloses and the dark unbounded room lit
by bare bulbs collapses into an unburning box
occupied by furniture now avoidable The dot
of closure menaces the attention which in
the flutter of eyelids can only tremble
like a nervous child lying awake lest
he be aware of the moment a closing
shutter of sleep claps to But a
snapped-off dream disperses
into darkness like gold
becoming mere motes
becoming light If
the eye lies open
to such dust as
sunlight brings
it will never
burn But that
creation make
a visible big
difference in
the way minds
look a shaper
will burn
outwardly
first and
thus once
there was
light

```

Figure 5. “Old Mazda Lamp”

The poem drawn above is the story in which someone, possibly the lamp itself or someone else, is narrating the moment of turning on and of the lamp and providing the light and removing the darkness. By using shapes and visual imagery, Hollander compares the situation with the mind of human being. A lighted room is compared to a knowledgeable mind being bright by means of lamp that is a metaphor standing for knowledge; moreover, a bare mind is like a dark room that no lamp is on and metaphorically there is no knowledge. Using such a geometrical technique, the poet wants to express his perspective about a knowledgeable person through the visual image created by an image that everyone sees in his/her life every day.

Like Hollander’s previous poems, “Old Mazda Lamp” draws the attention of the readers first to the shape and then to the connotation and the idea conveyed in the poem. The miscellany and then the manipulation of the words are of astonishing importance due to the fact that it is the poem of the words which are intermingled to draw a shape and then to convey the meaning. When looking at a lamp, one perceives that a sharp point on the top of the lamp is both the initial and the final point where the glass of the lamp has been completed. Destroying this high-pitched point is equal to destroying the entire lamp and consequently its structure. Hence, this point is the most vital part, playing a very substantial role which is both the end and the beginning. Comparatively, in the poem, in the first and second lines, the words ‘on’ and ‘off’, besides being the key points in the meaning, should be very sharp and small words in size at the top of the lamp itself. The poem sets out on a journey with ‘[o]n’ and ends the journey with ‘light’ (line, 38) which is the reason of being on; this leads the reader to appreciate a symmetry in the meaning of the poem which acts like a cyclical order existing in geometrical shapes.

The number of the lines is thirty-eight and their length changes as the real size of a lamp increases or decreases, creating a harmony in the unique structure of the poem. Surprisingly, if one wishes to compare the measures of the poem with the measures of a real lamp, the only difference would be the degree of scale, i.e., the poem is wholeheartedly matches the lamp but the scale is different. Hollander visualizes the various vicissitudes of life of a lamp into a very deep understanding of life of a man. He wants to use the visual power of mind in order to convey the meaning indirectly. Turning a lamp off and on which is one of the most tangible phenomenon in human’s daily life is a strange comparison that Hollander uses to convey his idea but through shape poetry.

## CONCLUSION

In the world of literature, poetry is considered as a form of compressed and complex language expressing multifaceted feelings. To comprehend the manifold interpretations and meanings of such a complex piece of poem, one has to scrutinize the existing words and phrases from the dimensions of rhythm, sound, images, metaphors, and shapes or patterns. John Hollander, as a well-talented poet who breathed the new air of life into old-style poetry forms, and whose poetry collections focused on a visionary, mythic, and shape oriented issues, considered poetry as even a phenomenon around which man can build a life. He was mostly interested in writing shape poems by which he expressed his ideas.

In these poems, he enjoys an experimental form in which the shapes of the poems and their meanings are interrelated to each other, and through reading them it is possible to reach the other. Hollander's structure of poems is taken from the Geometric Forms (classified for the poets) by Puttenham, Birken and Coon. They considered some of the shapes as the basic figures for poets who are to compose pattern poems and Hollander used them as the framework and then created his poems such as "Swan and Shadow," "Graven Image," "Crise De Coeur," and "Old Mazda Lamp" based on that theory. His poems are fully geometrical with balanced shapes to help the readers understand the meaning even without a full reading of the text.

Consequently, Hollander is believed to be the granddaddy of geometrical poetry, his selected poems are contemplated to be the valuable foundations, sources and motivations for those who are absorbed in writing pattern poems, especially in the geometrical and mathematical sub-category, and likewise those who are in search of discovering a path to have a universal, general and overall appreciation on the literature of past and present and their relationship with each other through the lenses of geometry. His special sort of poetry consists a wide range of poems enjoying outlandish, strange, or even unrealistic shapes as well as realistic and ordinary ones, containing the above-mentioned "Swan and shadow," having two sorts, either with or without the mirror image in the lake; "Graven Image," the picture of a star shining from very far away, "Crise De Coeur," a heart narrating the story of its own, and "Old Mazda Lamp," the existence and non-existence of knowledge in human mind. He, in fact, gives his perception and understanding of the modern life in the amazing combination of mathematical and geometrical structures, while establishing at the same time the Hollanderian Pattern Poetry.

## REFERENCES

- Birken M and Coon AC. 2008. *Discovering Patterns in Mathematics and Poetry* (Internationale Forschungen Zur Allgemeinen Und Vergleichenden Literaturwissenschaft). New York: Rodopi P.
- Higgins D. 1987. *Pattern Poetry: Guide to an Unknown Literature*. New York: State U of New York P.
- Hilbert E. 2011. "Without a Net: on Optic, Graphical, Acoustic, and Other Formations in Free Verse." Poetry Criticism Conference. 9 September, n. p.
- Hollander J. 1969. *Types of Shapes*. Connecticut: Yale UP.
- Kempton K. 1990. "Visual Poetry: A Brief History of Ancestral Roots and Modern Traditions." *An International Journal of Visual Poetry*. Vol. 3: 4, n. p.
- Puttenham G. 1970. *The Arte of English Poesie*. Eds. G. D. Willcock and A. Walker. Cambridge: Cambridge UP.
- Swansburg J. 2010. "At Yale, Lessons in Writing and in Life." *The New York Times*, Vol. 5: 7. 3-13.
- Wolfe B. C. 2008. "Venerable Poet's Words to a Pop Music Beat." Interview, *The New York Times*, February, especial ed. Vol. 2: 10. n. p.