

ON ALEXANDRINES IN ENGLISH VERSE

The French adore the form; there's little rhythm, though:
caesura halfway through; six syllables to go
before another beat. That language lacks the stress
which gives to English speech its accented address.
We rarely get away from our iambic sound,
though trochees, anapests, and dactyls stick around.
No need to stretch the lines. Thus Milton, Dryden, Pope
preferred pentameter. The latter's clever trope

(a wounded snake that drags his slow length through the verse)
displays the glaring truth: the alexandrine's worse
for those of Shakespeare's tongue. (Alas: give writers rope,
and they will hang themselves. A line of lesser scope
might favor good effects.) The dramatist Racine
used twelve-syllabic lines, scene after tragic scene,
but he, of course, was French; and so were Molière
(so witty!), Mallarmé, Vigny, and Baudelaire,

all masters of their art.—In contrast, think of Keats
(much magic), Coleridge, Donne—just four or five clear beats.
(Remember “Kubla Khan”!) And there's this evidence.
The great Paul Valéry (a poet of much sense
and rare, exquisite taste) used for his masterpiece
(the “Cemetery” ode, evoking France and Greece)
a rhythm he had heard emerging in his head—
decasyllabic, strong. Insistently, it led

him on: he would attempt to raise the power of ten
to alexandrines' twelve. A further challenge then:
he would divide the lines *four/six* or else *six/four*,
the syllables arranged to honor even more
impressions of expanse through art's economy.
The alexandrine's length can be curtailed, you see,
with little sacrifice. Or so it would appear,
when genius sounds the note. One point arises here:

why whip a dying horse? The alexandrine's flown—
césure, enjambement—such terms almost unknown.
In France, as here, you choose: bad prose or weak free verse—
no form, much sophistry; “postmodern” is a curse.
Hexameters or not, the aim of verbal art
is beauty, sorcery—seducing mind and heart.
From measured English feet to unaccented French,
some demon is on hand: true poetry's a wench.