Bad Poetry or Good Light Verse?

Treasure No 28: Bad Poetry or Good Light Verse? by Norman Nicolson,
An article from Bulletin 101, Summer 1964

(From the *Church Times*, April 24th, 1964, by courtesy of the Editor)

'Light verse, poor girl, is under a sad weather'—so said Mr W. H. Auden in *Letters from Iceland*, which contains perhaps the most brilliant, sustained specimen of the form produced in our time. He goes on:

> *Except by Milne and persons of that kind*
> *She's treated as démodé altogether.*

And, though this was written about thirty years ago, the situation has scarcely changed since then except drat 'Milne and persons of that kind' have now disappeared from the literary scene. Of course, Mr John Betjeman has arrived to take their place, but Mr Betjeman is a serious and accomplished poet whose work merely looks like the kind of light verse that pretends to look like poetry.

Hard to Define

Yet to say that *A Subaltern's Love-Song* is not true light verse is not to say what light verse is. Mr Auden was addressing Lord Byron, so that his claims for the medium are not modest. On the other hand, he admits that he himself would be quite content:

> *To pasture my few silly sheep with Dyer*
> *And picnic on the lower slopes with Prior.*

To mention Byron, Dyer and Prior is to show how hard it is to try to draw a dividing line between poetry and verse. Nor is it very useful. Yet, when we speak of the 'poetry' of Schumann or Constable, or that of a film or a ballet, we are speaking of a quality which may be hard to define but is easy to recognise. So, too, when we speak of the 'poetry' of a prose-writer such as De Quincev or John Ruskin. Poetry, then, in its literary form, may perhaps be described as verse which has that quality of 'poetry' while verse which doesn't have it is merely 'light.'

The word ‘merely,’ however, gets us into trouble right away. For the difference between poetry and light verse is one of kind and not necessarily one of degree. A. E. Housman had far more ‘poetry’ in him than the Byron of *Don Juan*, but no one would call him a greater poet. Nor can we say that poetry is serious and light verse is frivolous or comic, for there is nothing comic about *Marmion* while *Don Juan* is often deeply serious.

The point is that the intentions of light verse are not those of poetry. They are, in fact, nearer those of prose: to inform, to persuade, to entertain. Mr T. S. Eliot, in his introduction to *A Choice of Kipling’s Verse*, has suggested that verse which has no pretensions to poetry may still have its own kind of greatness; that we can speak of a great verse-writer as well as a great poet. Such a writer, he thinks, was Kipling.

The particular example may be disputed, but the comments which accompany the choice are of much interest. ‘I do not mean … by verse’ he says, ‘the work of a man who would write poetry if he could: I mean by it something which does what “poetry” could not do. The difference which would turn Kipling’s verse into poetry does not represent a failure of deficiency: he knew perfectly well what he was doing; and from his point of view more “poetry” would interfere with his purpose.’

What, then, does verse do that poetry cannot do; and, still more important, what do both do that prose cannot? To find the answer we must remember that verse and poetry are the literature of the illiterate. Some kind of rhythmic pattern in words seems to have emerged in nearly all human societies long before language had been put into writing. From the very beginning it was probably associated with music and dancing, for rhythm, whether of speech, melody or movement, has a profound emotional effect.

It is, moreover, an effect which can be shared. Rhythm binds a group together, rouses impulses, combines and intensifies them. Words in rhythm had an essential part in all tribal rituals, religious or secular, and also in private magic, charms and incantations. From this aspect of rhythm speech comes ‘poetry’ as we most often think of it—the poetry of the Psalms, of Milton, Keats or Dylan Thomas.

But words in rhythm had another quality: they are easy to remember. In a time before written records this was of immense importance, so that laws, doctrines, traditions, local history and biography, useful information and moral teaching could all be remembered in verse and passed on from generation to generation. Even after reading and writing had become common among the upper classes, the uneducated still continued to preserve their inherited wisdom in inherited rhyme, as do children even to-day.

And from this aspect of rhythmic speech comes what we now call light verse—the verse of the Robin Hood ballads, of Thomas Tusser’s *Hundred Good Points of Husbandry*, of Samuel Butler’s *Hudibras*, of much of Swift, Gay and Cowper, of Scott’s romances, of *The Ingoldsby Legends* and the Savoy Operettas. The list, of course, is one to be argued about, for it is characteristic of the best verse that it is continually filtering over into poetry. Yet, speaking generally, the type of verse represented in that list, whether or not we call it ‘poetry,’ is almost entirely unwritten and unread to-day.

In part, the present unpopularity of both light verse and poetry is due to the spread of education. For verse is primarily an aural and not a written medium. Even though for centuries poets have been putting down their work on paper, it still has to be heard, to be listened to in the mind's ear, before it can become verse at all. If it is read with the eye only, and at ordinary reading speed, it lacks rhythm and sound and becomes merely a kind of eccentrically printed prose.

There was a time when all reading was reading aloud, tor the art of silent reading seems to have come quite late in the history of civilisation. It was remarked of St Ambrose that, when he read, no sounds came from his lips. Yet apparently even he moved his lips and presumably read at the speed of speech. One may guess that in the days before printing it was not easy for the eye to skip along the page ahead of the natural spoken rate of the words.

To-day, when printed words are flashed at us from television screens, advertising hoardings, cinema frontages, tradesmen's vans, bus-tickets and cans of tinned fruit, we are beginning to forget that they are primarily a recorded form of speech. Instead, they are becoming shorthand visual symbols. We are even taught quick ways of absorbing them, by skimming along the tops of the letters or by gulping whole groups of words at a time. The sense of a human voice actually speaking has been largely lost.

All this makes the reading of verse practically impossible except for the few who can discipline themselves to read in the old, slow manner. In fact, verse is now more easily transmitted by public performance, on the radio or in song, than it is in print. And it seems to me that, if future developments in communications make it unnecessary for the majority of people to learn to read, the new illiteracy may bring about a re-birth of poetry.

This is only half the answer, however, for poetry is still written and passionately valued by the few, while light verse is ignored as much by the few as by the many. There may be a clue in this difference between 'few' and 'many' For poetry, as it is practised to-day, is mostly a solitary art. Truly public poems—*Paradise Lost* or the *Elegy in a Country Churchyard*—are no longer written. The poet is a man talking to himself or talking to an ideal audience of one.

Light verse, on the other hand, is always public. The audience may, at times, be small, but it must be one with whom the poet feels at ease and at home. Mr Auden wrote his *Letter* at a time when he felt that he had a ready and responsive audience of Left-wing youth; Mr Eliot wrote *Practical Cats* when he had a ready and responsive audience of god-children.

The really great light verse comes when the poet feels at home not just with a group but with a society. That was the case in the eighteenth century, when the dividing line between poetry and verse almost disappeared. Even so un-typical a poet as William Cowper, a recluse and a neurotic, could confidently address the whole nation and trust that he would be understood.

While such confidence remained, light verse was an honourable and important medium. Byron used it for a satirical novel in which the technical dexterity of the poet prompts the reader like an insinuating tone of voice; Scott used it for a series of narrative ballads which, though they may often stray over the line from good verse into bad poetry, have nevertheless an exuberance, a tincture of romance, which was lost when he turned to prose.

Romanticism, however, helped to destroy light verse by destroying the commonly-held views and shared assumptions which linked the eighteenth-century poet with his audience. From then onward, light verse became not a medium on its own but a kind of mock-poetry: The *Jackdaw of Rheims* usurped *The Lady of the Lake*.

One of the results of this was a decline in the congregational hymn—a decline which, unfortunately, came at the very time when new hymns were greatly needed. For the congregational hymn is really religious light verse. 'Poetry' in the magical sense, is found in our services in the Psalms, the Canticles and the liturgy, but, in congregational hymns, as Mr Eliot said of Kipling, 'poetry' would interfere with the purpose. There is 'poetry' obviously, in the best hymns of Watts and Wesley, but it comes there largely by accident and derives, in most cases, from the Bible rather than the writer's own imagination. Watts may have modelled himself on Milton, but his sober, generalised diction belongs to the most solid and unpretentious tradition of eighteenth-century verse; while Wesley's virtuoso felicity of phrase and metre has much in common with all that was most adroit and delightful in the lighter verse of his time.

The mid- and late-nineteenth-century hymn-writers, however, had no light-verse models to turn to. So they turned to the poets. Now it is not my wish to depreciate the nineteenth-century Anglican hymn-writers. Their work filled gaps left by the predominantly Evangelical or Calvinist writers of the eighteenth century. It is usually edifying, sometimes dignified and often picturesque. But, still more often, the poetry interferes with the purpose, and the hymn falls into prettiness, sentimentalism or a blur of pious attitudes.

The clean-cut, direct, forceful and essentially congregational qualities of even such minor eighteenth-century hymn-writers as Montgomery, Newton or Cennick have been thrown away for a cupful of watery poetry. One cannot help thinking that, if the later Victorians had turned not to Wordsworth, Milton and Dante but to the lyrics of Gilbert and Sullivan, they might have caught some of the vitality which was to whistle itself away through the safety-valves of the Gospel Songs.

To-day we have no Gilbert and Sullivan. The popular ballad belongs to the crudest form of light verse, while the modish cabaret-lyric belongs to the most ephemeral form. Great religious poetry has been written in our time, but most of it gives no guidance at all to the hymn-writer. Because of which, it seems to me, the hymn will remain a most difficult and tantalising art-form until some change in society brings in a new kind of light verse, popular, intelligent, adaptable, and capable of being enjoyed by readers of different education and class.

Until then, Ken, Watts, Charles Wesley, Cowper, Newton, Heber and Newman—to name only my own favourites—will have to go on helping twentieth-century congregations to praise their Maker in largely eighteenth-century words.