D. A. POWELL

Saudade

all the tired kids have gone to bed
orange lamps on the coast highway
the lady gaga concert has let out
and the fog has rolled in
I’ve got a guitarist’s fingers wrapped around
my strings slightly out of tune there are
no words

D. A. Powell’s books include Repast (Graywolf, 2014) and Useless Landscape, or A Guide for Boys (Graywolf, 2012). He lives and teaches in San Francisco, California.
DAVID HATHWELL

Sunday at the Symphony

Again, in the dimmed assembly hall ready as a church for ritual, an evening exhibition of spectral warhorses: a something suite after an overture to nothing, a long, lulling ride on a phantom gondola, before intermission a masterly seascape deemed the best.

To recover ourselves, we stand, seek bright cleared spaces, regroup or roam.

Next a young Polish (Finnish?) violin with an accomplished, quiet bearing and Tchaikovsky’s grand concerto, plush reliquary of fine feeling, so wan its gestures, so feeble its hold on the heart its first devotees must have been ghosts, summoned tonight to this convocation of pale spirits.

ELIZABETH BARLOW

Beauty Above Me, Beauty Below Me, 2019
Oil on linen, 18 x 24 in

David Hathwell’s new collection, The Power of the Telling, follows Between Dog and Wolf (2017) and Muses (2016), his debut collection. A former English teacher, he has degrees in English from Stanford and Columbia Universities, and a degree in music theory from CUNY. He lives in San Francisco, California, and sings baritone in local choruses.

Note about the poem: “Concert performance of symphonic overtures to dramas was common in the nineteenth century. An instrumental ‘barcarole’ imitates a Venetian boat song. The ‘best’ seascape is Debussy’s La Mer.”

Note about the art: “The ‘best’ seascape is Debussy’s La Mer.”

Published by

David Hathwell

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COURTESY THE ARTIST

ELIZABETH BARLOW
The Ancient and Honorable Art of Light Verse

Examining the history of humor in poetry

In academic America the prejudice against humor in poetry is matched only by the bias in favor of the sincere autobiographical utterance.


In the school for Latin and Greek at Westminster,” reminisced Jeremy Bentham in 1827, “instruction in the art of making nonsense verses under that name, precedes the art of making such verses as pretend to sense.” “Such verses as pretend to sense”—there’s a phrase to launch a thousand indignant scholarly ships of screed. Bentham, the English philosopher and jurist, published those words in his monumental Rationale of Judicial Evidence (for which we can thank his adoring pupil, compiler and editor John Stuart Mill).

Five years later Charles Dodgson was born. Dodgson studied not at Westminster, but at Rugby. But if Rugby, which later schooled poets such as Rupert Brooke, taught verse as Westminster did, it is little wonder that Dodgson, writing under the pen name Lewis Carroll, produced such jewels of nonsense as “The Walrus and the Carpenter” and “Jabberwocky.” “Jabberwocky,” among other examples of light verse, is included within the pages of the New Oxford Book of English Verse and so many other anthologies of the best of English poetry. That inclusion confers a dignity, an honor, upon the genre.

Yet light verse appears as frequently as Halley’s comet in literary and popular magazines today. It is scorned as lowbrow, base-born babble not worthy of inclusion within the larger genre of poetry. It rose in prominence and popularity in Dodgson’s time and again during the heyday of the New Yorker, when that “sophisticated humor magazine” printed light verse by such literary wits as Dorothy Parker, Phyllis McGinley, and Ogden Nash. Is light verse truly like Halley’s comet, attaining ascendancy only once every seventy-five years or so? It appears not. The present period in poetry, a period of sustained stony seriousness, seems an aberration, one that soon will disappear like a fading, frightful apparition.

Light verse is ancient and hardly the sole province of English. Its provenance may be traced to the Greeks of antiquity, though there’s no reason to think the Greeks invented it. (In Western civilization that is; the Chinese composed light verse much earlier, at least as early as the poems collected in Confucius’ Shijing [The Classic of Poetry], from what we call the eleventh to the seventh centuries BCE.) Referring to wine, Homer famously joked (most probably wrote), “No poem was ever written by a drinker of water.” The first book of Iliad contains the account of a...
That the limerick is named that is no accident.

The early medieval Irish, literate for little more than a century, were intoxicated with light verse, as we know from a story of the mid-sixth-century Irish ri, or king, Columcille...

high and hilarious Olymposian quarrel between Zeus and his wife, Hera. Edith and Archie, Alice and Ralph were never funnier. And just as with the Bunkers and the Kramdens, Hera gets the best of her blustering husband.

Light and comic verse can be found throughout the pages of The Greek Anthology.

Here is a short verse by Nicarchus, in the prudish translation of W.R. Paton as revised by Michael A. Tischler in 2014 (the New Loeb Classical Library edition) “A favorite device was to rewrite, in verse, all or a part of a story of the mid-sixth-century Irish ri, or king, Columcille. (Columcille has been canonized, his name wretchedly altered in the spiritual footsteps of Saint Patrick of the century before, established forty-one monasteries in Ireland before leaving in 557, in some form of exile, to establish a monastery on Iona, in the Hebrides off the western Scottish coast. There, as at his Irish monasteries, literacy, learning, love of learning, and, of course, verse were taught. A man of energy as prodigious as Patrick’s, Columcille then established an additional fifty-nine monasteries in Scotland. Columcille returned to Ireland from Scotland once, to argue a tax case before a government council meeting in Drumceatt. Columcille must have been a fine advocate, for this long absent Irishman prevailed in his argument in that tax case. Columcille then tarried at that council meeting long enough to rise to debate another item on the agenda, a proposal to suppress the order of poets. That proposal was understandable enough, for the fondly satirical verses of the wandering Irish bards vexed the authorities and aristocracy no end. Poetry, argued Columcille, was as essential to Irish life as laughter, food, and the clay-and-wattle hermitages of the monks. Not only ought the hards not be dishonored, but throned Columcille, they should be urged to enlarge their circle and travel far, teaching to all the arts of verse, serious and light. Columcille prevailed again (and thus won two cases in one day in a high court of Ireland). When the verdict was announced, the merry poets broke out in a riotous celebration in the council chambers, composing, extemporaneously, witty and bawdy verses in praise of Columcille, verses that embarrassed the former ri and budding saint. Columcille thereupon dispatched the hards to all of Ireland and beyond to teach the craft and stiflened art of poetry.

Medieval light verse could be bawdy, satirical, and reverent, though at bottom it was — comedic art of poetry.

The hilarity of many of Chaucer’s verse stories—“The Miller’s Tale” and “The Reeve’s Tale,” for starters—and of Shakespeare’s comedies, all of course likewise in verse, is the stuff of literary immortality. Too many Shakespearean characters to name speak some of the greatest comic lines in Western history—and in iambic pentameter at that. Think just of Falstaff, Nick Bottom in A Midsummer Night’s Dream, or the Clown in All’s Well That Ends Well.

Late seventeenth-century light verse saw Samuel Butler’s Hudibras, which, after the English Civil War, satirized the English Puritans (not to mention bad poetry), and the 259 Fables of Jean de La Fontaine, which drew broad comic sketches of society, and were so respected they became required learning for schoolchildren.

The most masterfully English light poem of the eighteenth century is Alexander Pope’s The Rape of the Lock (1712–1714), a mock-epic in which the polite society of his day shows to be but a shadow of the ostensibly heroic days of old. Lord Byron’s verse novel Don Juan (1819–1824), satiric and casual, combined the colloquialism of medieval light verse with a sophistication that begat imitations. Literary sorts conventionally think of the early nineteenth century as the Romantic Age in English letters. Poets such as Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, Keats, and Shelley come chiefly to mind. Were it not for those red-giant stars, we might better know the names of Thomas Hood (1799–1855), W. Mackworth Praed (1802–1832), and Thomas Lovell Beddoes (1803–1849), three poets born within a span of four years who wrote some of the Wittiest verse ever. Beddoes’s Death’s Jest Book is memorable for its title alone. Here are a few lines from Hood’s “Ode to Mr. Malthus”:

Oh Mr. Malthus, I agree
In every thing I read with thee!
The world’s too full, there is no doubt,
And wants a deal of thinning out,—
It’s plain—as plain as Harrow’s Steeple—
And I agree with some thus far,
Jabberwocky appears. Adventures in Wonderland

Auden, a poet, writer, and critic of high seriousness, to Woodrow Wilson, had memorized “The Purple Cow,” in whose real social unit, and the parent-child relationship as the lage or small-town community left the family as the only real social bond. . . Why should we let precautions so absorb us, We ought to...

Who say the Queen’s too popular, In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Oxford University Press in the 1910s selected W.H. Auden, a poet, writer, and critic of high seriousness, to edit The Oxford Book of Light Verse, which was published in 1916. The nineteenth century, wrote Auden, “saw the development of a new kind of light poetry, poetry for children and nonsense poetry. The breakdown of the old village or small-town community left the family as the only real social unit, and the parent-child relationship as the only real social bond . . . [T]he great Victorian masters of this kind of poetry, Lewis Carroll and Edward Lear, were as successful in their day as Mr. Walt Disney has been in ours.” Lear (1812–1888) published light and nonsense verse from 1846 until his death. (And thereafter too. Lear’s The Scroodius Pip, unfinished at his death, was completed at his death, was completed—1888—published light and nonsense verse from 1846 until his death. (And thereafter too. Lear’s The Scroodius Pip, unfinished at his death, was completed and published in 1931.) Writing as Lewis Carroll, Charles Dodgson (1832–1898) published Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland in 1865 and in 1871 Through the Looking-Glass, and What Alice Found There, in which “Jabberwocky” appears.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, most Americans knew and many, including President Woodrow Wilson, had memorized “The Purple Cow,” composed by Gelett Burgess and first published in Burgess’s magazine the Lark in San Francisco in May 1895.

I never saw a Purple Cow, I never hope to see one; But I can tell you, anyhow, I’d rather see than be one.

In Versailles to negotiate the treaty of peace with Germany following the Great War (the treaty that ensured the rechristening of the war as the First World War), Wilson showed first signs of madness. On May 1, 1919, when gravest diplomatic work needed doing, Wilson began manically rearranging furniture in his Palace of Versailles offices, ranting incoherently and calling a particularly offensive chair “the purple cow.” Five months later he suffered the stroke that incapacitated him the rest of his presidency and his life.

Burgess, who lived from 1866 to 1912, became famous for “The Purple Cow” and often professed irritation that his fame had arrived on account of that one bit of light verse and not his serious poetry. In April 1917, in the last issue of the Lark, he published “Confession: and a Portrait Too, Upon a Background that I Rave”: Ah, yes, I wrote the “Purple Cow”— I’m Sorry, now, I wrote it, But I can tell you anyhow I’ll Kill you if you Quote it!

In truth, as every one of the twenty-four issues of the Lark makes plain, Burgess worked strenuously at the art of light verse.

The war had produced great serious poetry, Isaac Rosenberg, Siegfried Sassoon, and Wilfred Owen, to name only three of the war poets. Yet throughout it, while they read of the horrors of Flanders, the Marne, Verdun, and the Marne again, the British had been kept laughing by the giddy light verse of poets like Reginald Arkell, whose popular All the Rumours included such arch poems as “Lloyd George Shot as a Spy” and “When the War Will End,” which tickles still.

Actual evidence I have none, But my aunt’s charwoman’s sister’s son Heard a policeman on his beat Say to a housemaid in Downing Street, That he had a brother who had a friend Who knew when the war was going to end.

Western poetry in the aftermath of the war was one of isolation and desolation.

T.S. Eliot’s The Waste Land (1922) was perhaps the poetic emblem of the postwar despair of the world. And yet Eliot proved himself a great master of the light-verse lyric. Here are just the last lines of the opening poem of Old Possum’s Book of Practical Cats, “The Naming of Cats,” the premise of which is that every cat has three different names. These lines address the cat’s third name, the name that only the cat knows.

When you notice a cat in profound meditation, The reason, I tell you, is always the same: His mind is engaged in a rapt contemplation Of the thought, of the thought, of the thought of his name: His ineffable Effaninefable Deep and inscrutable singular Name.

Langston Hughes was the acknowledged leader of the Harlem Renaissance, said to be the inventor of jazz poetry. He published his famous poem “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” in 1921, one year before Eliot published The Waste Land. Like Eliot, he wrote light verse. The Sweet and Sour Animal Book contains twenty-six whimsical poems about animals whose names begin with each letter of the English alphabet.

Imagine the pages of The New Yorker without the light verse of masters like Dorothy Parker, Ogden Nash, and Phyllis McGinley. On the other hand, you needn’t imagine. Peruse any issue of the last thirty years or so to see. The New Yorker, founded as a “sophisticated humor magazine” in 1925, is almost wholly without such poets today, without a whisper of apologia for their banishment. Paul Muldoon, former poetry editor of the New Yorker, would occasionally relent. He published long-time staff writer Calvin’s Trillin’s “Have They Run Out of Provinces Yet?” in the April 4, 2016 issue. The poem would not have made Ogden Nash or Li Bai chuckle, but it brought forth from readers anguished, hand-wringing cries of anti-Chinese racism. The charge was but a dash of balderdash. But the magazine has bravely retreated from its one intrepid foray into its beginnings.

Turning eastward, the great Li Bai (Li Po in earlier English renderings of his name) was a masterful practitio...
subjects rose up and torched the Emperor’s own libraries. Happily, Confucius’s books, including Shi Jing, or The Classic of Poetry, which contains much light verse, somehow survived the conflagrations.

As a parenthesis, two hundred dense essays, clotted with scholarly cant, footnotes fiendishly abridged in their own cast, and other arcana of the genre, should explore the pre-eminen ce of women writers of light verse, such as Dorothy Cant, and other arcana of the genre, should explore the pre-

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