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An Imperfect Balance, 2018
Oil on panel, 10 x 10 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

JOHN BRISCOE

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.

—David Lehman, *The American Poetry Review*, November–December 1995

“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 screeed. 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 popular appeal 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 ascendance 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’s *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

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high and hilarious Olympian 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. Tueller in 2014 (the New Loeb Classical Library edition) “A fine woman of good proportions is attractive to me, whether in her prime or elderly, Simylus. For the young one will take me in her arms, and if she is an ancient, wrinkled crone, she will suck me.”

The wickedly funny verse works of Aristophanes will ever be difficult to surpass. How to end the endless Peloponnesian War? Have all the women go on sex strike, then watch the men try to don a *thorax*, or *pteriges*, over their painful protrusions of priapism. That’s the thrust, as it were, of the women’s stratagem in Aristophanes’s *Lysistrata*.

Here is Lysistrata herself, translated by George Theodoridis, exhorting the women of Athens:

And so, girls, when fucking time comes . . . not the faintest whiff of it anywhere, right? From the time those Milesians betrayed us, we can’t even find our eight-fingered leather dildos. At least they’d serve as a sort of flesh-replacement for our poor cunts . . . So, then! Would you like me to find some mechanism by which we could end this war?

Several centuries later, the Roman poet Catullus, known for poems of love and longing and here translated by Stanton Hager, could be as bawdy and coarse as the Miller and Reeve in Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*.

You shouldn’t be surprised, Rufus, that no girl
Wants to lay her pretty thigh under yours,
That not even your enticements of silk dresses
And dazzling jewels can seduce a single one.
What’s keeping them away? A fatal rumor
That a wild goat capers in the baryards of
your armpits!
He scares off the poor dears—and no wonder, for
He’s a rank, mangy beast. Who can blame a
pretty maid
For retching at the thought of bedding with him?
Choose! Either kill the beast that fouls the nose
Or quit being surprised when the girls turn tail.

Patterns in light poetry set by these classical masters were followed through the nineteenth century.

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. (Columcille has been canonized, his name wretchedly Latinized as Saint Columba.) The greatest Irish poet of his day, Columcille renounced his royal position and, following 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 fiendishly 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 bards not be banished but, thundered 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 bards to all of Ireland and beyond to teach the craft and sullen comic art of poetry.

Medieval light verse could be bawdy, satirical, and irreverent, though at bottom it was fiercely moral. Goliards, students and clerics in England, France, and Germany, were followers of Bishop Goliard. Their riotous twelfth-century Latin poems sang out in praise of drinking, debauchery, and gambling—and impiously mocked the hypocrisies of the priests and princes of the Catholic Church. A favorite device was to rewrite, in verse, all or a part of a Latin mass or other part of the liturgy, making of it something rich, hilariously strange, and perverse. These comic masses were composed over a period lasting more than half a millennium, beginning about 1100 CE. The first was “The Gamblers’ Mass,” found in the *Carmina Burana*. It’s to be seen whether Pope Francis would tolerate a bishop of such irreverent temperament as Goliard’s. Of the same unsilken ilk were the coarsely comic French fabliaux and mock-epics such as *Roman de Renart*.

French light poetry of the sixteenth century was written largely in ballades and rondeaux, allowing poets like

Clément Marot and Pierre de Ronsard to spread and fan their vibrant verbal plumage. A vein of light melancholy runs through the witty verse of many English Renaissance poets, from Thomas Wyatt to Richard Lovelace.

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 239 *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 masterly 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), sardonic 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 (1799–1845), W. Mackworth Praed (1802–1839), 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,

Who say the Queen's too popular,
That is,—she has too many people.

. . . Why should we let precautions so absorb us,
Or trouble shipping with a quarantine—
When if I understand the thing you mean,
We ought to *import* the Cholera Morbus!

(Cholera ravaged England and Europe between 1831 and 1833. Thomas Robert Malthus was an Anglican priest whose *Essay on the Principle of Population*, published in 1798, remains controversial today.)

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We are a country of millions of fools, who believe the most imbecile things about ourselves and the world, but when it comes to poetry only solemnity counts and joking is anti-American.

— Charles Simic, *The Paris Review*, Spring 2005

Oxford University Press in the 1930s selected W.H. Auden, a poet, writer, and critic of high seriousness, to edit *The Oxford Book of Light Verse*, which was published in 1938. 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 Scroobious Pip*, unfinished at his death, was completed by Ogden Nash and published in 1968.) 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 Celett 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 maniacally 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 1951, 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 1897, in the last issue of the *Lark*, he published “Confession: and a Portrait Too, Upon a Background that I Rue”:

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 effable
Effanineffable
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 almost 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 apology 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

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racism. The charge was but a dash of balderdash. But the magazine has cravenly 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 practitioner of light verse. Consider this poem, “Addressed Humorously to Tu Fu,” addressed to his dear friend and fellow poet in the court of the Tang emperor (about the time Western literary forebears were grunting out *Beowulf*), the earnest, soulful Du Fu (also Tu Fu), translated by Shigeyoshi Obata:

Here! Is this you on the top of Fan-ko Mountain,
Wearing a huge hat in the noon-day sun?
How thin, how wretchedly thin, you have grown!
You must have been suffering from poetry again.

Li Bai, also known as the “banished immortal,” was expelled from the court, perhaps for his witty verse. If so, perhaps the apparent fate of light verse today, while cruel, is not unusual.

Are we experiencing our own cultural revolution, the academy standing in place of Mao, or for that matter of China’s first emperor, who in 213 BCE ordered the burning of all books not owned by him? (The emperor’s furious

subjects rose up and torched the Emperor's own libraries. Happily, Confucius's books, including *Shijing*, 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 abbreviated in their own cant, and other arcana of the genre, should explore the pre-eminence of women writers of light verse, such as Dorothy Parker and Phyllis McGinley, during that gilt era now past.

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Trying to print light verse in this country [the United States] nowadays is like trying to peddle mink coats at a convention of militant ecologists.

—X.J. Kennedy, *Parnassus* 21, nos. 1 and 2

And so, it would seem, light verse is to be pronounced deceased.

Yet modern poets—poets of “such verses as pretend to sense” in Jeremy Bentham's felicitous phrase—have not only written the stuff, but have produced fine and hefty anthologies of light and nonsense verse. Poet and author Carolyn Wells compiled and edited *A Nonsense Anthology* in 1905, published by Charles Scribner's Sons in New York. Oxford University Press commissioned W.H. Auden to compile an anthology of light verse in the 1930s, a book still popular today. In 1978, Oxford chose the English poet and author Kingsley Amis to compile *The New Oxford Book of Light Verse*. Amis acknowledged that his selection for the anthology was quite different from Auden's:

My illustrious predecessor[s] . . . choice of poems and mine had differed widely, so much so that, for instance, our respective extracts from *Don Juan* turned out not to have one stanza in common. And a book of light verse that includes “Danny Deever”, one of the most harrowing poems in the language (nothing else by Kipling, either), must be founded on principles quite unlike mine.

Light verse has long had a place in anthologies even of “serious” or “sense” verse. “Jabberwocky” may be found, as mentioned, in *The New Oxford Book of English Verse*. Joseph Parisi, long the editor of *Poetry* magazine (twenty

years until Ruth Lilly's tragic gift to it of two hundred million dollars), included Ogden Nash's delighting “Columbus” among his *100 Essential Modern Poems*.

In private conversation, Parisi asserted that writing light or nonsense verse is far more difficult in some ways than writing serious verse. One misstep, one false note, and the delicate and intricate edifice will collapse, whereas in serious verse the reader will forgive a tin word or halt line, if in succeeding lines the poem recovers its footing and its wit. Elizabeth Jennings, writing in the *Daily Telegraph* on March 28, 1992, agreed. “Good light verse,” she wrote, “is harder to write well than more serious poetry; so much depends on technique and careful craftsmanship.” Writer A.A. Milne took a far firmer position. Light verse writers, he wrote, labor at “the hardest and most severely technical work known to authorship.”

Light verse, Milne went on, seeming on the brink of a definition, “is not bastard poetry on a frivolous theme. It is true humour expressing itself in perfectly controlled rhyme and rhythm.” In the introduction to his 1978 *New Oxford Book of Light Verse*, Kingsley Amis wrote, “I must now attempt what I hardly had to think of at all, except as a rather daunting prospect, while I was putting this anthology together, and try to define light verse. . . . My illustrious predecessor [Amis is stuck on these three words as the only apposite apposition for Auden] was not much help to me here.” In the end, Amis gives up the attempt: “Light verse is not one thing but many, so much so that I should hate to have to frame a single generalization which would comprehend them all: every law I have laid down admits of the odd exception.”

Of nonsense verse, Geoffrey Grigson wrote much the same thing. In *The Faber Book of Nonsense Verse*, published the year after Amis's anthology of light verse, Grigson wrote, “It wouldn't be sensible—in raising the curtain on a nonsense anthology—to be too serious or too historical about nonsense; or to say, with one's jaw stuck out, that proper word-nonsense is only of one kind or another.”

Fecund Oxford University Press brought out *The Oxford Book of Comic Verse* in 1994. Editor John Gross introduced his subject with the obligatory endeavor to define. “Comic verse is verse that is designed to amuse—and perhaps that is as far as any attempt at a definition ought to go.” But of course, Gross didn't stop there. Happily, though,

he did acknowledge, “It would be equally wrong to assume that comic verse is necessarily a minor art. Chaucer alone is enough to disprove that: a great poet, never greater than when he is expounding an essentially comic vision of life. The same could be said of Byron, Burns, arguably of Dryden.”

Light verse, nonsense verse, comic verse—whatever is the source of this odd human urge to taxonomize? Is Pluto a planet or asteroid? Is *The Tempest* a tragedy or a comedy? Is “Jabberwocky” nonsense verse, a mini-mock-epic, or a profound portrait of maternal love?

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By the third stanza, the dark side of the mind has to come in—or it's not a poem. So, light verse is not poetry at all. Cheerful poetry is not poetry at all.

—Robert Bly, RTE Radio I, June 1, 2006

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Back, though, to the embers of the funeral pyre of light verse. A glint of them somehow puts one in mind of Edward Lear, master of the limerick, and of Auden again, who famously wrote on the occasion of Yeats's death, “Poetry makes nothing happen.” Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan, insulted in 2016 by a German light verse writer who wrote of Erdogan's passion for a goat, demanded that German chancellor Angela Merkel prosecute the poetaster. In Britain, within days, the President Erdogan Offensive Poetry contest launched. The winner? None other than the former lord mayor of London, the classically trained and presently seated (at least as of this writing) prime minister of the United Kingdom, Boris Johnson. Johnson's winning submission was this:

There was a young fellow from Ankara
Who was a terrific wanker
Till he sowed his wild oats
With the help of a goat
But he didn't even stop to thankera.

So, some stubbornly refuse to dance on the grave of light verse. Besides Boris Johnson, the late Christopher Hitchens is another. He wrote of the limerick in 2009, “Those who think of the humble, unassuming limerick

as a trivial or vulgar thing are making a serious mistake. Its capacity and elasticity can contain multitudes.” Think Hitchens and Johnson have slipped their hitching posts? The British historian and poet Robert Conquest, who studied the Soviet Union for most of his ninety-eight years, in one unsimple limerick summed his life's learning:

There was a great Marxist called Lenin
Who did two or three million men in.
That's a lot to have done in,
But where he did one in
That grand Marxist Stalin did ten in.

When did the English turn funny and Americans stodgy and stuffy? Will the President Erdogan Offensive Poetry contest cause poetry, contrary to Auden's famous line, to make something happen?

It has.

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