



September 2005

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## Verse Versus Poetry

by M. H. Perry

The most obvious aspect of poetry is rhyme. What is not as clear is that not everything that rhymes is poetry. Much rhyme is simply annoying jingles. The highway department in one state posts “Making it wider/ For you and your rider.” The rhyme is intended to be memorable and to catch attention. It succeeds. It also annoys. Mark Twain was one of the first to write about annoying phrases that one couldn’t get out of one’s mind. We’ve all had the experience of getting a shallow song or melody in our thoughts of which we can’t rid ourselves. Because these rhyme, they tend to be mistaken for poetry.

During the early part of the 1900’s books were put out with poem after poem of shallow rhyme because most of those “poets” thought that all one needed to do to write a poem was to create rhyme, they wrote volumes of jingles that no one will read.

As a result, serious poets stopped using rhyme or used it very sparingly in the following decades of the recent century. Gradually, it became felt that only bad poetry rhymed and “real” poetry did not.

Those who buy into that will need to dismiss all of Shakespeare’s sonnets and most of his plays or decide that good poetry used to rhyme, but no good poetry does now. The absurdity of that viewpoint should be obvious, yet there are countless graduate students who will dismiss poets on the basis that their work rhymes. Rudyard Kipling is one such poet. Much of what he writes is simplistic. Yet if all he wrote were:

*On the road to Mandalay,  
Where the flyin’-fishes play,  
An’ the dawn comes up like thunder  
Outer China ‘crosst the Bay!*

that alone would make him timeless. The combination of the visual and auditory simile—describing the power of the dawn with the sound of thunder—creates an intensity that is remarkable.

Ironically, the attempt of some poets during the mid twentieth century to distinguish between “good” poetry and “bad” poetry may have been a primary contributing factor in decreasing both the popularity of and appreciation for poetry in general. When college freshmen name their favorite poet and are sneeringly told that their choice is a “bad” poet, they usually lose interest in pursuing the topic, and when they become tired of the simple verses they once liked, they become disenchanted with poetry in general.

A better method of teaching poetry would be to distinguish between what we refer to as poetry and what we refer to as verse and to acknowledge that if verse is meaningful to you at some moment, it has value. It may

not be meaningful in a day, or you may like it just because you liked it as a child. The Eddie Guests and Rod McKuens may not have much staying power, but lines like Guest's "It takes a heap o' livin' in a house t' make it home..." can have an appeal for a time. Platitudes become tiresome; and over simplifications are tedious, but simple aphorisms have a depth that go far beyond simple jingles. Liking the latter can lead to an appreciation of the former which speak to universal truths.

Lewis Carrol's

*We are but older children, dear,  
Who fret to find our bedtime near.*

is a simple verse that speaks to timeless reality as does Henry Austin Dobson's

*Time goes, you say? Ah no!  
Alas, Time stays, we go.*

Shakespeare often used a rhyming couplet when he wanted to emphasize the point, to conclude:

*This thou perceiv'st, which makes thy love more strong,  
To love that well, which thou must leave ere long.*

The problem with rhyme is that those who use it badly—and it takes a great deal of work and training to use it well—feel that brutalizing meter and word order is an acceptable sacrifice for obtaining rhyme. They may as well hold that building a car without wheels or an engine is an acceptable sacrifice for a design embellishment.

Alexander Pope, the supreme master of rhyme, left the ageless primer for those who would use the technique well in his *Essay on Criticism*. He deplores bad poets who use monosyllabic lines to force rhyme, or those who choose words that are expected and tiresome,

*Where'er you find "the cooling western breeze,"  
In the next line, it "whispers through the trees";  
If crystal steams "with pleasing murmurs creep,"  
The reader's threatened (not in vain) with "sleep"*

Some of the greatest poetry of all time rhymes, and some of the greatest poetry of all time does not rhyme. What all timeless poetry must do is speak to the core of us, speak to what connects us with the Cosmos. In order to accomplish that, it is as Pope said,

*True grace in writing comes from art, not chance,  
As those move easiest who have learned to dance.  
"Tis not enough no harshness give offense,  
The sound must seem an echo to the sense....*

Word Worth®

## COLUMNS

WORLD MAGAZINE OF  
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COVER

## The Poet's Art

by Charles Miess

When just the right words are combined in exactly the right way, the meaning becomes much greater than the sum of the individual words. When this elusive combination has the power to inspire the imagination, move the emotions, or create pleasure, it is likely to be poetry. If the meaning reveals itself slowly, and the experience becomes greater with each reading, then it is probably *good* poetry.

We should not confuse poetry with verse. Verse typically has a regular rhythm and it usually rhymes. It is fun to read and is easy to understand. There is nothing wrong with verse; it serves a useful purpose just like other forms of writing. An example of very simple verse might be:

*Thirty days hath September,  
April, June, and November:  
All the rest have thirty-one  
Excepting February alone,  
To which we twenty-eight assign  
Till leap year makes it twenty-nine.*

Verse may state facts or tell an amusing story in an appealing way, but what you see is what you get. With one reading, you have it all. It seldom contains figurative language or profound significance. Verse that is more complex may approach poetry as the depth of meaning increases. At this level, the distinction between verse and poetry becomes blurred for most of us.

Poetry doesn't have to rhyme. It may not have a regular rhythm. With some poetry, like fine wine and scotch, we have to acquire a taste. Thus, the poet's intent is not always clear the first time we read the poem. With every reading, however, it reveals more of itself and adds to our understanding. A good poem seldom becomes stale. Each time we read it, we delight in new insights and discover fresh and subtle flavors in the words, sounds, and phrases.

Good poetry distills a remarkable amount of meaning into a minimum of words. Poets achieve this with metaphor, personification, symbol, allegory, and other figures of speech. They select words that are rich in connotation, as well as sensuous words that create images from our own experience. They even consider the sounds of words to add both meaning and pleasure. Hard consonant sounds are often used to connote strength, violence, and majesty. Soft vowel sounds imply peace and serenity. The great eighteenth-century poet, Alexander Pope, probably said it best in *An Essay on Criticism*: "The sound must seem an echo to the sense."

Although some forms of poetry may verge on prose (and vice versa), for the most part there is a difference. Prose communicates facts and ideas or offers entertainment. In its purest form, the author selects words with singleness of meaning to avoid ambiguity and ensure only one interpretation. An example often used to illustrate the distinction between prose and poetry is the eagle. Webster's dictionary defines the eagle as: "any of the various large diurnal birds

of prey noted for their strength, size, keenness of vision, and powers of flight.” The dictionary presents useful scientific facts about the eagle, but it does not tell us what it *feels* like to be an eagle. For that experience, we must turn to poetry, and, in this case, to Tennyson:

### The Eagle

He clasps the crag with crooked hands;  
Close to the sun in lonely lands,  
Ringed with the azure world, he stands.

The wrinkled sea beneath him crawls;  
He watches from his mountain walls,  
And like a thunderbolt, he falls.

*Alfred, Lord Tennyson (1809 – 1892)*

Right away, the hard consonant sounds of “clasp,” “crag,” and “crooked,” portrays the impression of power and supremacy. In addition, the repetition of the “k” sound, known as alliteration, is pleasing to the ear. The word “hands” instead of talons or claws, personifies the eagle. By giving it a human characteristic, the poet persuades us to put ourselves in its place—and he does it with a single word.

Is the eagle really closer to the sun than we are? With the sun ninety-three million miles away, the height of his perch is insignificant, but it gives a powerful implication of the eagle’s dominion. He is the center of the world (Ringed with the azure world, he stands). Even the sea is subservient (The wrinkled sea beneath him crawls), and the mountains are his fortress (He watches from *his* mountain walls). The eagle flies with intent, power, purpose, and independence. He is not a prisoner of gravity—he does not fall like a helpless rock—he falls like a thunderbolt! In six short lines, we have seen the world from an eagle’s point of view, and we have an idea of what it feels like to be an eagle.



U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Photo by Dave Menke



Charles Miess © 2005

Sometimes the poet plants images in our minds and lets us draw our own conclusions from them. Consider Cornford’s poem “The Guitarist Tunes Up.” It makes a rather obvious comparison, and yet it may take several readings over several days to fully appreciate this beautiful poem.

### The Guitarist Tunes Up [i]

With what attentive courtesy he bent  
Over his instrument;  
Not as a lordly conqueror who could  
Command both wire and wood,  
But as a man with a loved woman might,  
Inquiring with delight  
What slight essential things she had to say  
Before they started, he and she, to play.

*Frances Cornford (1886 – 1960)*

It starts with a man gently tuning his guitar. The image changes to that of a man and woman engaged in loving foreplay. With mutual kindness, love, and respect they respond to one another until they are in tune—until they are one. In the end, we’re not sure which is the reality and which is the metaphor: *before they started, he and she*, to play. Is it the man and his guitar that are united in love as one, or is it the man and woman? In either case, the poet

assures us that the music will be exquisite.

[i] *The Guitarist Tunes Up from "Frances Cornford, Selected Poems,"* Enitharmon Press, London, 1996. Reprinted by permission of Professor James Cornford, Norfolk, England.

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## We're pleased to bring you humorous verse by John T. Baker

The verses below are selected from Baker's books *From Bed to Verse* and *If Words Were Birds*

Click on the preview below to open the window with the rest of the verse.

### Money Talks

John T. Baker

The point of view that money talks  
is utterly awry;  
the only time I hear from mine

### The Hole Truth

John T. Baker

A motorist stopped in for gas  
Out on a country road;  
He filled his tank, picked up a coke

### Nine Months Later

John T. Baker

When Bill and Joe went out to hunt  
One bitter wintry day,  
A blizzard struck and they were forced

### Two Little Boys

John T. Baker

Two little boys while out one day  
Observing big kids playing  
Picked up a lot from what they heard

### Puffs of Smoke

John T. Baker

Like puffs of smoke old friends now disappear;  
They drift upon the wind and then are gone,  
Dispatched, perhaps, to scout some new frontier,

### Brain Drain

John T. Baker

A brain transplant, a man was told,  
Would be his only hope.  
Without that operation, there

# Money Talks

John T. Baker

The point of view that money talks  
is utterly awry;  
the only time I hear from mine  
is when it yells, "buy, buy."

No matter if or not it speaks,  
I can but sit and sigh  
and sadly mourn my money as  
it blithely waves bye-bye.

"A penny for your thoughts," folks say,  
and some may be enticed  
to speak up only then to find  
their thoughts were overpriced.

That time is money, as some say,  
I'll take a solemn oath,  
for sadly I've discovered that  
I'm running out of both.

I'm playing hard the game of life  
but there's this growing doubt:  
I'll probably cash in, I fear,  
before I can cash out.

It seems that everything I want  
the prices are a crime;  
they cost a pretty penny when  
I've not a dirty dime.

The money that I'd saved has fled  
to Zanzibar or Siam;  
it once was my mad money-now  
it's not as mad as I am.

I'd like to make an honest buck

I honestly keep trying;  
but if I said I make a lot  
I'd honestly be lying.

Alas, behold the modern man  
whose guidelines have been lost;  
he knows the price of everything  
but has not learned the cost.

I've never been a millionaire,  
I don't expect to be one,  
but I can tell you if you care,  
I'd rather be than see one.

In this great Age of Affluence  
I'm not one of the group;  
instead of being in the chips,  
I wind up in the soup.

# The Hole Truth

John T. Baker

A motorist stopped in for gas  
Out on a country road;  
He filled his tank, picked up a coke  
And paid for what he owed.

While sipping on his drink he spied  
Two laborers nearby  
At work along the right of way  
Whose antics caught his eye.

One man would dig a hole, then watch  
The other fill it in;  
They'd move a bit and then the same  
Procedure would begin.

They kept this up for quite a while;  
The first man dug a hole,  
The second piled the dirt back in;  
The driver took a stroll

To where the men were working and  
Said, "Please don't take offense,  
But what you guys are doing here  
Just doesn't make much sense.

"Why do you keep on digging holes  
The other fellow fills?  
If you'll excuse me, friend, it makes  
You look like imbeciles."

"We're working for the county," said  
The first man cheerfully,  
"To beautify the roadway and  
We have a team of three.

"The way it works, I dig the hole,  
Then George sticks in the tree,  
And Bill here comes along and fills  
The hole back up, you see.

"But poor old George is sick today,  
He's got the doggone flu,  
And me and Bill, the union says,  
Still have our jobs to do!"

# Nine Months Later

John T. Baker

When Bill and Joe went out to hunt  
One bitter wintry day,  
A blizzard struck and they were forced  
To find some place to stay.

They drove up to a farmhouse where  
They asked to spend the night.  
The trim, attractive woman said,  
"It may seem impolite,

"But I am living here alone  
Since my poor husband died;  
The neighbors all around would talk  
If I let you inside.

"But you can use the barn in back,  
It's nice and dry and warm."  
And so they bedded down out there  
And next day left the farm.

Nine months then passed and Bill received  
A formal letter sent  
By an attorney which he read  
With great astonishment.

When finally he thought that he  
Had got it figured out  
He telephoned his buddy Joe  
To satisfy all doubt.

"Say, Joe, do you remember that  
Attractive widow where  
We spent the night nine months ago

When we were hunting bear?"

"Of course! " said Joe, "You bet I do!"

"Well, let me ask you, pal:  
Did you slip out up to the house  
And visit with that gal?"

"Well, yes, I did," said Joe, "I guess  
I'll have to bear the blame."

"And when she asked for your address,  
Did you then use my name?"

"Well, yes, I'm sorry, Bill, but it  
Was just a one-night fling."  
Bill laughed, "Well, buddy, she just died  
And left me everything."

# Two Little Boys

John T. Baker

Two little boys while out one day  
Observing big kids playing  
Picked up a lot from what they heard  
The older children saying.

Two phrases in particular  
They thought were rather swell;  
"You bet your ass," was one of them,  
The other, "What the hell!"

The little boys were brothers and  
Repeated what was said  
Until that night when it was time  
For them to go to bed.

Next morning when their mother asked  
What they would like to eat,  
The youngsters still remembered what  
They'd heard out on the street.

The first lad quickly made his choice  
And in a tone imperial  
Informed his mom, "Well, what the hell,  
"I think I'll have some cereal."

The mother gasped, then snatched him up  
And hustled him upstairs  
While paddling his petite behind  
Unmindful of his tears.

When she returned, the second boy,  
His countenance funereal,  
Said, "Mama, you can bet your ass  
"I won't be having cereal!"

# Puffs of Smoke

John T. Baker

Like puffs of smoke old friends now disappear;  
They drift upon the wind and then are gone,  
Dispatched, perhaps, to scout some new frontier,  
While I, bereft, can only journey on.

Each waking night I vainly call the roll;  
I summon Tom and Wayne and Jim and John;  
When comes no word, no answer to console,  
I breathe a toast, then sadly journey on.

For who can say how far we have to go?  
The master plan unfolds as it was drawn;  
The ending is not given us to know,  
To find our fate we all must journey on.

It matters not how many friends we've known,  
We travel life increasingly alone.

# Brain Drain

John T. Baker

A brain transplant, a man was told,  
Would be his only hope.

Without that operation, there  
Was no way he could cope.

"It's going to be expensive," said  
His doctor - "drugs and such!  
And male brains run one million each,  
Female brains half that much."

"Male brains cost more?" the patient asked.  
"I'm really not surprised.

The reason, I suppose, is that  
Men's brains are oversized."

"No, not at all," the doctor said;  
"You are, I fear, confused.

The reason female brains cost less  
Is just that they've been used."