CHRISTMAS PUDDING

2005

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Robert Middleton

Christmas Pudding is an anthology devoted essentially to aspects of the use of language, particularly in poetry but also in wit and humour. Poetry is a vehicle for sharing ideas and emotions and, as such, is a mark of our civilisation and collective intelligence: it also promotes an understanding of the nature and importance of language, man's highest natural attribute. I am concerned that few people read poetry today and that the contemporary dominance of the visual media poses a threat to our command (and even understanding) of language and to a decline in writing skills.

I was deeply influenced by the teaching and literary criticism of Yvor Winters at Stanford University in the early 1960s, by his rigorous insistence on the distinction between connotation and denotation in poetry and by his moral crusade against the decline of reason as a precept in art and literature (and life) since the end of the eighteenth century. The accompanying relaxation of content and meaning - and subsequent abandonment of form - that characterise verse for the last two hundred years is, at least in part, responsible for a breakdown in communication between writer and reader: today, 'anything goes' - much verse is obscure and, if it were not divided into lines, would be indistinguishable from prose. I share Winters' view that the late sixteenth to the mid-seventeenth century was a golden age for poetry and that the poets of this age developed a "timeless" medium for poetic expression characterised by the clear communication of ideas and emotion, using words not only for their sound, rhythm and imagery but also to convey meaning. I recognise, however, that the poetry of this period may not be easily accessible to the general reader as a result of unfamiliar contemporary poetic conventions and shifts in the meaning of words. I also dissent from Winters' rather pessimistic view that not much of comparable quality has been produced since. While drawing on poetry of the "golden age", *Christmas Pudding* aims to identify those later poems that, in my opinion, meet Winters' strict criteria.

In addition to the desire to entertain and amuse, *Christmas Pudding* has thus a serious intent: I aim to include poems that use language in a rational and comprehensible way, that have a clear meaning with a minimum of decoration and cliché and that express feelings we can share. My choice is intended to show that poetry can be (I would even say, should be) a means of communication between normal rational people.

The inspiration for *Christmas Pudding* is *Christmas Crackers*, an anthology of wisdom, wit and linguistic surprise collected by the distinguished scholar John Julius Norwich. I have tried to emulate his mixture of humour and erudition, although a significant part of my raw material is drawn from the more mundane spheres of e-mail and the Internet. My title seems to me apposite: a Christmas pudding is full of varied, interesting and sometimes surprising ingredients, is well-rounded, requires a considerable amount of stirring in its preparation, is still good a long time after the first serving and is not heavy if enjoyed sparingly. Moreover, a pudding is the least pretentious of dishes, acknowledging Norwich's superior recipe.

John Everett Millais (1829-1896) – The Boyhood of Raleigh (Tate Gallery, London)

We who with songs beguile your pilgrimage
And swear that Beauty lives though lilies die,
We poets of the proud old lineage
Who sing to find your hearts, we know not why, -
What shall we tell you? Tales, marvellous tales
Of ships and stars . . .
James Elroy Flecker (1884-1915)

e-mail robert@pamirs.org
Visit my website www.pamirs.org

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I have had much pleasure in 2005 doing research into the travels of the first explorers of the Pamirs and learned, among other things, that the seventh century Chinese pilgrim, Xuanzang, travelled through the "hot desserts (sic) and snowy mountains in hunger and thirst, which was definitely a great challenge to the enthusiastic seeker of the true Buddhism." (Knowing the doubtful character of much Central Asian cooking, I can imagine it was.)

Another subject of my research was the Earl of Dunmore, a witty and engaging author, whose memoir, *The Pamirs; being a Narrative of a Year's Expedition on Horseback and Foot through Kashmir, Western Tibet, Chinese Tartary and Russian Central Asia* (London 1893), was truly entertaining – and, for me, a little nostalgic.

Dunmore describes how, in order to keep warm in the company of Russian troops on the Murghab plateau at 20° below zero, he taught them how to dance a Scottish reel which was, as he says, "the first Highland reel ever danced in the Pamirs." Just over a hundred years later, I had the privilege to dance what was probably the second in the company of a distinguished Scottish diplomatic visitor, this time on the banks of the legendary Oxus, on return from a trip up the Yazgulom valley.

I spent Christmas day 1992 in Moscow, discussing with the refugees from Gorno-Badakhshan the possibilities for an Aga Khan emergency and development programme in the Pamirs. Exactly a hundred years earlier, Dunmore spent Christmas day in Sopu Kurgon (then called Sufi Kurghan) – a small town south of Osh in today's Kyrgyz Republic, where I discussed a similar programme with the local inhabitants in 2002 – and describes how he concocted his own "hot dessert" from the most improbable ingredients:

> We then rode off together in the direction of Sufi Kurghan, which was reached quite early in the afternoon. Here I found an akoi [yurt] ready prepared for me, and soon after I had seated myself at the fire that was burning brightly in the centre, a Kirghiz brought in Hassan Beg's doster-khan [offering] of dried apricots, raisins, and pistachio nuts, the sight of which possible ingredients gave me the bright idea of having a Christmas Pudding for dinner. So calling in Ramzan, I commenced by explaining to him as best I could in the Urdu tongue that this day was the great festival of the Christian's year, and one on which all right-minded Franghis [foreigners] were wont to spend the first half of the day at their Mosques, the inside walls of which were decorated with green branches and made as much as possible to resemble a jungle, and the other half of the day and most of the night in over-eating themselves with the most unwholesome food their Khansamas [cooks] could procure in the *bazaars*, and, therefore, as I did not wish to be behind-hand in following the example of my brother Franghis, but wished – in the absence of my mosque – to keep the day as near as possible in accordance with the articles of my faith, I called upon him as a good Mussulman, to come to my assistance in the manufacture of the most unwholesome edible compound the united ingenuity of our inventive brains could devise.
>
> So after a long discussion and close inspection of our resources, we built up between us, using

the Beg's doster-khan, a Christmas Pudding, which turned out so successful that I cannot refrain from giving a minute description of its architecture.

First of all we took some dark-coloured Kirghiz flour and some baking-powder and the frozen yolks of six Kashgar eggs, which we scraped with a knife into a yellow powder, and after being well kneaded, this compound was rolled out, my telescope making a grand rolling-pin. We then stewed in a small Degchi [saucepan] all the Beg's apricots and raisins with some of my own honey. Another corner of the fire was occupied by a frying-pan, in which I fried the kernels of the pistachio nuts, in the only butter I could get, which I very carefully took out of a fresh tin of *Sardines au Beurre*. When the paste looked as like the beginning of a roly-poly pudding as we could make it, we poured the apricot, raisin and honey stew into the middle of it, then rolled it up and stuck the outside of it full of the fried kernels of the pistachio nuts, until the result looked like a new-born porcupine. We then proceeded to bake the whole thing as best we could, and I venture to say that no cook in Europe, on the 25th December, 1892, could have been as proud of his Christmas Pudding as I was of mine.

Although its manufacture was not the least interesting part of it, still the eating of it was more pleasurable than most enforced duties are usually, notwithstanding the slight suspicion of a flavour of sardines about it, which at any rate was a new departure in Christmas Puddings, and possessed the one great advantage and charm of novelty.

T T T T

"The Boyhood of Raleigh" by John Everett Millais and the lines by James Elroy Flecker on the frontispiece to this year's *Christmas Pudding* announce its theme: narrative poetry[1].

Flecker – who also wrote memorably "What is life without jam?" and, more controversially, "And some to Meccah turn to pray, and I toward thy bed, Yasmin" (although some would say he had his priorities right) – is a much underrated poet, but one whose work merits rediscovery. He tells a good tale, and nowhere better than in his long-forgotten play *Hassan* published posthumously in 1922.

HASSAN:
Sweet to ride forth at evening from the wells,
When shadows pass gigantic on the sand,
And softly through the silence beat the bells
Along the Golden Road to Samarkand.

ISHAK:
We travel not for trafficking alone;
By hotter winds our fiery hearts are fanned:
For lust of knowing what should not be known
We take the Golden Road to Samarkand.

MASTER OF THE CARAVAN:
Open the gate, O watchman of the night!

THE WATCHMAN:
Ho, travellers, I open. For what land
Leave you the dim-moon city of delight?

MERCHANTS (with a shout):
We take the Golden Road to Samarkand!
(The Caravan passes through the gate)

THE WATCHMAN (consoling the women):
What would ye, ladies? It was ever thus.
Men are unwise and curiously planned.

A WOMAN:
They have their dreams, and do not think of us.

VOICES OF THE CARAVAN (in the distance singing):
We take the Golden Road to Samarkand.

T T T T

Narrative poetry has very different characteristics from the poems included in previous editions of *Christmas Pudding*. Its primary aim, or course, is to tell a story rather than express a moment of emotion, and, to do so, it frequently adopts a rhythmic form that would be inappropriate in lyrical poetry but that carries the story along and accentuates the action. Some narrative poems literally gallop ahead and leave the reader almost breathless.

In addition, most are long, and for reasons of space I have been able to include only a small selection of favourites and, in some cases, only a few verses to give a feel for the whole. I hope nevertheless that the reader will be encouraged to seek out the full version: many of them have been known to us since childhood and there may also be an element of nostalgia in reading again some long-forgotten favourite poem. Please let me know if your favourite is not here and I will try to include it in a future edition.

Narrative poetry – in the form of the epic – was one of the earliest poetic forms and every culture has an oral tradition of epic story-telling, frequently in verse form, including the holy books of some religions.

John Milton's *Paradise Lost* is one of the longest and best known narrative poems in English. I am not a great fan of Milton, but he certainly wrote sonorous (if rather impenetrable) verse. I particularly remember the fourth line of the following from Book IV.

Know ye not then, said Satan, filled with scorn,
Know ye not me? ye knew me once no mate
For you, there sitting where ye durst not soar:
Not to know me argues yourselves unknown,
The lowest of your throng; or, if ye know,
Why ask ye, and superfluous begin
Your message, like to end as much in vain?

[1] For suggestions for inclusion in this year's *Christmas Pudding* I am indebted to Iain Cameron, Hans and Barbara Freudweiler, Catherine Hieronymi, John Hill, Fritz Stewart, John Tomaro and many others.

T T T T

One of the characteristics of Early and Middle English poetry was the use of alliteration, a technique in which words beginning with the same letter are grouped in a single line. Charles Churchill (1731–1764) in *The Prophecy of Famine* called the technique "apt alliteration's artful aid". Sometimes infuriating, it can also be spell-binding, as in the wonderful opening lines of *Piers Plowman* by the fourteenth century poet William Langland, in which he has a vision of a "fair field full of folk".[2]

In a somer sesun, whon softe was the sonne, I schop me into a shroud, as I a scheep were; In habite as an hermite unholy of werkes Wente I wyde in this world wondres to here; Bote in a Mayes morwnynge on Malverne hulles Me bifel a ferly, of fairie, me-thoughte.	In a summer season, when soft was the sun, I clothed myself in a cloak as I shepherd were, Habit like a hermit's unholy in works, And went wide in the world wonders to hear. But on a May morning on Malvern hills, A marvel befell me, of fairy, I thought.[3]

William Chaucer was a contemporary of Langland. His *Canterbury Tales* are better known than *Piers Plowman*, partly because the language Chaucer used was closer than Langland's to modern English, with many accretions from French, even if from time to time Chaucer finds it difficult to abandon alliteration completely.

Whan that Aprill with his shoures soote The droghte of March hath perced to the roote, And bathed every veyne in swich licour Of which vertu engendred is the flour; Whan zephirus eek with his sweete breeth Inspired hath in every holt and heeth The tendre croppes, and the yonge sonne Hath in the ram his half cours yronne, And smale foweles maken melodye, That slepen al the nyght with open eye- (So priketh hem Nature in hir corages); Thanne longen folk to goon on pilgrimages And palmeres for to seken straunge strondes To ferne halwes, kowthe in sondry londes; And specially from every shires ende Of Engelond, to Caunterbury they wende, The hooly blisful martir for to seke That hem hath holpen, whan that they were seeke.	When in April the sweet showers fall That pierce March's drought to the root and all And bathe every vein in liquor that has power To generate therein and sire the flower; When Zephyr also has with his sweet breath, Filled again, in every holt and heath, The tender shoots and leaves, and the young sun His half-course in the sign of the Ram has run, And many little birds make melody That sleep through all the night with open eye (So Nature pricks them on to ramp and rage) Then folk do long to go on pilgrimage, And palmers to go seeking out strange strands, To distant shrines well known in distant lands. And specially from every shire's end Of England they to Canterbury went, The holy blessed martyr there to seek Who helped them when they lay so ill and weak.[4]

My favourite is *The Miller's Tale*, a bawdy and raucous account of the cuckolding of a foolish old carpenter by his lovely young wife.

This carpenter hadde wedded newe a wyf, Which that he lovede moore than his lyf; Of eighteteene yeer she was of age. Jalous he was, and heeld hire narwe in cage, For she was wylde and yong, and he was old, And demed hymself been lik a cokewold. He knew nat catoun, for his wit was rude, That bad man sholde wedde his simylitude. Men sholde wedden after hire estaat, For youthe and elde is often at debaat. But sith that he was fallen in the snare, He moste endure, as oother folk, his care. Fair was this yonge wyf, and therwithal As any wezele hir body gent and smal. A ceynt she werede, barred al of silk, A barmclooth eek as whit as morne milk Upon hir lendes, ful of many a goore. Whit was hir smok, and broyden al bifoore And eek bihynde, on hir coler aboute, Of col-blak silk, withinne and eek withoute. The tapes of hir white voluper Were of the same suyte of hir coler; Hir filet brood of silk, and set ful hye. And sikerly she hadde a likerous ye; Ful smale ypulled were hire browes two, And tho were bent and blake as any sloo. She was ful moore blisful on to see Than is the newe pere-jonette tree, And softer than the wolle is of a wether. And by hir girdel heeng a purs of lether, Tasseled with silk, and perled with latoun. In al this world, to seken up and doun, There nys no man so wys that koude thenche So gay a popelote or swich a wenche. Ful brighter was the shynyng of hir hewe Than in the tour the noble yforged newe. But of hir song, it was as loude and yerne As any swalwe sittynge on a berne. Therto she koude skippe and make game, As any kyde or calf folwynge his dame. Hir mouth was sweete as bragot or the meeth, Or hoord of apples leyd in hey or heeth. Wynsynge she was, as is a joly colt, Long as a mast, and upright as a bolt. A brooch she baar upon hir lowe coler, As brood as is the boos of a bokeler. Hir shoes were laced on hir legges hye. She was a prymerole, a piggesnye, For any lord to leggen in his bedde, Or yet for any good yeman to wedde.	This carpenter had lately wed a wife Whom he loved better than he loved his life; And she was come to eighteen years of age. Jealous he was and held her close in cage. For she was wild and young, and he was old, And deemed himself as like to be cuckold. He knew not Cato, for his lore was rude: That vulgar man should wed similitude. A man should wed according to estate, For youth and age are often in debate. But now, since he had fallen in the snare, He must endure, like other folk, his care. Fair was this youthful wife, and therewithal As weasel's was her body slim and small. A girdle wore she, barred and striped, of silk. An apron, too, as white as morning milk About her loins, and full of many a gore; White was her smock, embroidered all before And even behind, her collar round about, Of coal-black silk, on both sides, in and out; The strings of the white cap upon her head Were, like her collar, black silk worked with thread, Her fillet was of wide silk worn full high: And certainly she had a lecherous eye. She'd thinned out carefully her eyebrows two, And they were arched and black as any sloe. She was a far more pleasant thing to see Than is the newly budded young pear-tree; And softer than the wool is on a wether. Down from her girdle hung a purse of leather, Tasselled with silk, with latten beading sown. In all this world, searching it up and down, So gay a little doll, I well believe, Or such a wench, there's no man can conceive. Far brighter was the brilliance of her hue Than in the Tower the gold coins minted new. And songs came shrilling from her pretty head As from a swallow's sitting on a shed. Therewith she'd dance too, and could play and sham Like any kid or calf about its dam. Her mouth was sweet as bragget or as mead Or hoard of apples laid in hay or weed. Skittish she was as is a pretty colt, Tall as a staff and straight as cross-bow bolt. A brooch she wore upon her collar low, As broad as boss of buckler did it show; Her shoes laced up to where a girl's legs thicken. She was a primrose, and a tender chicken For any lord to lay upon his bed, Or yet for any good yeoman to wed.

T T T T

[2] Later poets also resort occassionally to alliteration: see below Byron's "He rushed into the field, and, foremost fighting, fell"; and Chesterton's "Dim drums throbbing, in the hills half heard".
[3] Translation into modern English by W. W. Skeat. London 1922
[4] Translation from http://www.librarius.com.

Alliteration, or the Siege of Belgrade - *Alaric Alexander Watts (1797-1864)*

An Austrian army, awfully arrayed,
Boldly by battery besieged Belgrade.
Cossack commanders cannonading come,
Dealing destruction's devastating doom.
Every endeavour engineers essay,
For fame, for fortune fighting - furious fray!
Generals 'gainst generals grapple - gracious God!
How honours Heaven heroic hardihood!
Infuriate, indiscriminate in ill,
Kindred kill kinsmen, kinsmen kindred kill.
Labour low levels longest, loftiest lines;
Men march 'mid mounds, 'mid moles, 'mid murderous mines;
Now noxious, noisy numbers nothing, naught
Of outward obstacles, opposing ought;
Poor patriots, partly purchased, partly pressed,
Quite quaking, quickly "Quarter! Quarter!" quest.
Reason returns, religious right redounds,
Suwarrow stops such sanguinary sounds.
Truce to thee, Turkey! Triumph to thy train,
Unwise, unjust, unmerciful Ukraine!
Vanish vain victory! vanish, victory vain!
Why wish we warfare? Wherefore welcome were
Xerxes, Ximenes, Xanthus, Xavier?
Yield, yield, ye youths! ye yeomen, yield your yell!
Zeus', Zarpater's, Zoroaster's zeal,
Attracting all, arms against acts appeal!

T T T T

Many years ago, I owned a book called *The Jenguin Pennings*, a selection of the writings of Paul Jennings. It contained that rare quality, humour, in abundance. Regrettably, I lent the book to someone who never returned it – obviously someone who appreciated his humour as much as I did. In the meantime, thanks to the wonders of Internet and the services of the Used Book Search (http://www.usedbooksearch.co.uk/cgi/search.cgi), I have tracked down his entire works (nine volumes).

In the 1950s and early 1960s, Paul Jennings contributed a regular column to the *Observer* and also wrote for *Punch* (whose demise I lamented last year), the *Spectator* and other papers. As the dust cover to his first volume (*Oddly Enough*) states, he belongs to "the not over-crowded ranks of English humorists."[5] Joyce Grenfell, a *grande dame* of English humour, commented on his second volume that "Paul Jennings is a quietly funny man. His book is witty, gentle and spacious." She meant every word and I am happy to share a few samples with the readers of *Christmas Pudding*. (If one of you still has my *The Jenguin Pennings*, I declare an amnesty provided the book is returned immediately.) Enjoy.

[5] I would add that I have not discovered any country that enjoys an abundance of humorous writing – at least the English have a tradition of wit in their literature.

FAR SPEAKING

There can be few words more seen and less read than the instructions in public telephone boxes. When we have pulled on three sides and at last found the one that opens, that is our last conscious, willed act; the rest is reflex. We stand on the little square of concrete, in our private world, our whole attention already on our correspondent; we are irritated by any delay, such as the maddeningly unhurried ratchety noise that goes on after we press Button B,[6] as though very leisurely mice were hauling up tiny sacks with a block and tackle. We are certainly in no mood to read instructions.

Hardly anyone would admit to having actually learnt to telephone by reading the instructions from scratch. It is true that, if we are townees, we do read in country kiosks, to our surprise, that all we have to do is to lift the receiver and listen for the operator; and we are mildly interested in the thin little directory containing the numbers of corn chandlers and farriers and the Regent Kinema. But on the home ground our literary attention is at its lowest level - a pity, because the instructions contain the only attempt ever made by Post Office prose writers, as far as I know, at romantic onomatopoeia - "a high pitched burr-burr". It sounds like the scientific definition of a West Country tenor.

This apathy has suddenly been disturbed, however, in a number of London boxes, which have lately blossomed out with instructions in French, German, Italian and Spanish. They provide a fascinating comparative study, and one's preconceptions about the languages are curiously disturbed; in fact, it is only the Italian which does what one would expect of it, when even a prosaic thing like dialling tone is described as *un trillo basso intermittente*.

The French is disappointing, for where one would expect a kind of marble poetic style it is, in fact, technical where it is not downright illogical. *Prière de s'adresser à l'opératrice en anglais,* it begins. If they can address the operator in English, why can't they read instructions in English, hey? *Décrochez le récepteur à l'oreille et attendre le son musical … introduire 2 pennies dans le dispositif d'encaissement.* There is admittedly a certain charm in the idea of awaiting the musical sound, as though the box should soon echo with a solemn passacaglia; but we are quickly brought back to technology with the *dispositif d'encaissement,* which sounds like the foundation of a suspension bridge. The correspondent cannot hear you but after the manoeuvre of the button A, we are told with great formality; and *Pour rappeler l'opératrice, agiter lentement le crochet commutateur.* Even the stolid English do not talk about the commutatory hook, preferring the fine conceit "cradle switch"; there is something illogical, too, about the injunction to agitate slowly; one thinks of a kind-hearted Communist who can't help liking his employer.

With the splendid German instructions, however, we step straight into the world of poetry and fairy-tales. The whole apparatus is treated animistically. *Sprechen Sie bitte mit der Fernsprechbeamtin,* they begin, and somehow it couldn't matter less that here also one is invited to *sprechen* to her in English; for the marvellous word, *Fernsprechbeamtin,* has already evoked a vision of a placid, fair-haired, semi-mythical Teutonic figure, a kind of Telephone Queen, deep in some German forest—the Far-speaking Beaming One.

As in all fairy tales, there are mysterious commands and taboos to be observed: *dann zwei Pennies in den Automaten werfen* - then throw two Pennies in the Automaton. But *Wenn Sie die gewünschte Nummer nicht kennen, kein Geld einwerfen:* if you do not know the Wished-for Number, do not throw in any Gold; if you do, the Automaton will probably clank ominously towards you in the

[6] Is any reader prepared to admit that he/she remembers the function of Button B? Or when a telephone call cost 2 pennies?

thickening twilight, and you will hear behind you *ein schnarrender Laut*, the schnarring noise made by the dragon who also lives in the forest. But somehow Good will triumph. The *Fernsprechbeamtin* will appear at the crucial moment and wave her wand, and you will be joyously re-united with your Wished-for Number, and the *Fernsprechbeamtin* will let you choose three gifts from her palace.

I should choose E to K, L to R and S to Z to replace three of the four A to D's that are always in my box.

T T T T

The following belong to the "headlong rush" category of narrative verse that leaves the reader breathless.

The Destruction of Sennacherib - *George Gordon Lord Byron (1788-1824)*

The Assyrian came down like the wolf on the fold,
And his cohorts were gleaming in purple and gold;
And the sheen of their spears was like stars on the sea,
When the blue wave rolls nightly on deep Galilee.

Like the leaves of the forest when summer is green,
That host with their banners at sunset were seen:
Like the leaves of the forest when autumn hath blown,
That host on the morrow lay withered and strown.

For the Angel of Death spread his wings on the blast,
And breathed in the face of the foe as he passed:
And the eyes of the sleepers waxed deadly and chill,
And their hearts but once heaved, and for ever grew still!

And there lay the steed with his nostrils all wide,
But through it there rolled not the breath of his pride:
And the foam of his gasping lay white on the turf,
And cold as the spray of the rock-beating surf.

And there lay the rider distorted and pale,
With the dew on his brow and the rust on his mail;
And the tents were all silent, the banners alone,
The lances unlifted, the trumpet unblown.

And the widows of Ashur are loud in their wail,
And the idols are broke in the temple of Baal;
And the might of the Gentile, unsmote by the sword,
Hath melted like snow in the glance of the Lord!

The Charge of the Light Brigade - *Alfred, Lord Tennyson (1809-1892)*

Half a league, half a league,
Half a league onward,
All in the valley of Death
Rode the six hundred.
"Forward, the Light Brigade!
"Charge for the guns!" he said:
Into the valley of Death
Rode the six hundred.

"Forward, the Light Brigade!"
Was there a man dismayed?
Not tho' the soldier knew
Someone had blundered:
Their's not to make reply,
Their's not to reason why,
Their's but to do and die:
Into the valley of Death
Rode the six hundred.

Cannon to right of them,
Cannon to left of them,
Cannon in front of them
Volleyed and thundered;
Stormed at with shot and shell,
Boldly they rode and well,
Into the jaws of Death,
Into the mouth of Hell
Rode the six hundred.

Flashed all their sabres bare,
Flashed as they turned in air,
Sabring the gunners there,
Charging an army, while
All the world wondered:
Plunged in the battery-smoke
Right thro' the line they broke;
Cossack and Russian
Reeled from the sabre stroke
Shattered and sundered.
Then they rode back, but not
Not the six hundred.

Cannon to right of them,
Cannon to left of them,
Cannon behind them
Volleyed and thundered;
Stormed at with shot and shell,
While horse and hero fell,
They that had fought so well
Came thro' the jaws of Death
Back from the mouth of Hell,
All that was left of them,

Left of six hundred.

When can their glory fade?
O the wild charge they made!
All the world wondered.
Honor the charge they made,
Honor the Light Brigade,
Noble six hundred.

T T T T

Spoonerisms and Mondegreens

Spoonerisms (phrases in which sounds are inverted in certain words, named after the Reverend William Archibald Spooner (1844-1930), Warden of New College Oxford, who was famous for his supposedly inadvertent practice of making such inversions), are a very special form of wit. Like narrative poetry, they can be too much of a good thing, but are sometimes very amusing.[7] For example, the following are among those attributed to Spooner himself:

The lord is a shoving leopard
It is kisstomary to cuss the bride
Mardon me padam, this pie is occupewed. Can I sew you to another sheet?
You have hissed all my mystery lectures, and were caught fighting a liar in the quad. Having tasted two worms, you will leave by the next town drain
We must drink a toast to the queer old Dean
We'll have the hags flung out
A half-warmed fish
Is the bean dizzy?

If you like Spoonerisms, you will probably enjoy also their distant cousins, **Mondegreens**, which are the misheard words of a song. The name was coined by Sylvia Wright, in an article called "The Death of Lady Mondegreen", in *Harper's Magazine* in 1954. From her childhood, she recalled the first verse of a famous Scottish ballad *The Bonny Earl of Murray* (*Child 181A*)[8] as follows:

Ye Highlands, and ye Lowlands,
Oh where have you been?
They have slain the Earl of Murray,
And the Lady Mondegreen.

"How romantic to have them both die together," she thought, and was bitterly disappointed when the last line turned out to be the much more prosaic: "And they laid him on the green." Examples are:

José can you see …? (*Actual lyric*: O, Say can you see? - The Star Spangled Banner)
My body lies over the ocean. (My Bonnie lies over the ocean – Traditional)
Oh my darling lemon pie. (Oh my darling, Clementine - Traditional)
She's got a chicken to ride. (She's got a ticket to ride - Beatles)
Pretty Woman, won't you lick my leg. (Pretty Woman, won't you look my way - Roy Orbison)
Reverend Bluejeans. (Forever in blue jeans - Neil Diamond)
I've been haulin' ass so long. (I've been holding out so long - Rolling Stones)
Home, where my love lies waiting, Simon, weep for me. (Home, where my love lies waiting, silently for me - Simon & Garfunkel "Homeward Bound")
Are you going to starve an old friend? (Are you going to Scarborough Fair? - Simon & Garfunkel)
Hope the city voted for you. (Hopelessly devoted to you - *Grease* soundtrack)
The bride bless the day, the dogs say goodnight. (The bright blessed day, the dark sacred night – Hymn)
Gladly, the cross-eyed bear. (Gladly the cross I'd bear – Hymn)

Since newspapers (*The San Francisco Chronicle*) and Internet blogs began publishing readers' contributions to the genre, the problem now is to know when a Mondegreen is genuine or when it has been invented.

T T T T

The Child Ballads are some of the finest narrative poetry in English. I include two of my favourites.

From **Sir Patrick Spens** (*Child 58*)

The King sits in Dunfermline town,
Drinking the blood-red wine;
"O where shall I get a skeely skipper
To sail this ship of mine?"

Then up and spake an eldern knight,
Sat at the King's right knee:
"Sir Patrick Spens is the best sailor
That ever sailed the sea."

The King has written a broad letter,
And sealed it with his hand,
And sent it to Sir Patrick Spens,
Was walking on the strand.

"To Noroway, to Noroway,
To Noroway o'er the foam;
The King's daughter of Noroway,
'Tis thou must fetch her home."

They had not sailed a league, a league,
A league but barely three,
When the light grew dark, and the wind blew loud,
And gurly grew the sea.

The anchors brake and the top-masts lap,
It was such a deadly storm;
And the waves came o'er the broken ship
Till all her sides were torn.

The ladies wrung their fingers white,
The maidens tore their heair,
All for the sake of their true loves,
For them they'll see nae mair.

[7] An alleged spoonerism led to the nickname "the Canadian Broadcorping Castration". The current president of the United States is known for curious turns of phrase, some of which may be considered spoonerisms. "If the terriers and bariffs (barriers and tariffs) are torn down, this economy will grow." (7.1.2001 in Rochester NY). I am sure also that many young Americans are today talking about "nucular" weapons, just as many young francophone children write "astérix" instead of "astérisk".

[8] *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, compiled and edited by Francis J. Child and published in the last decade of the nineteenth century, is a standard reference for British ballads.

The Three Ravens (*Child 26*)
There were three ravens sat on a tree,
They were a black as black might be,
The one of them said to his mate.
"Where shall we our breakfast take?"

Down in yonder green field,
Their lies a knight slain under his shield,
His hounds they lie down at his feet
So well they do their master keep.

His hawks they fly so eagerly
No other fowl dare him come nigh,
Down there comes a fallow doe
As heavy with young as she might go.

She lifted up his bloody head,
And kissed his wounds that were so red,
She got him up upon her back
And carried him to earthen lake.

She buried him before the prime,
She was dead herself ere even-song time,
God send every gentleman
Such hawks, such hounds, and such leman[9].

T T T T

The Guardian carries a weekly column of "Notes and Queries" that invites readers to provide improbable answers to unusual questions. Most contributions provoke at best a smile, but some – such as the following – have a humour worthy of Paul Jennings.

Question: Bumblebees and flies crash into window-panes – yet they fly away unharmed. What is their secret?

Answer 1: Windows only hurt computers.
Answer 2: They have a low pane threshold.

T T T T

Richard Southey (1774-1843) is normally considered a minor poet and some of his poetry is pretty awful. It is perhaps not surprising that Lewis Carroll's parody - in *Alice in Wonderland* - of Southey's *The Old Man's Comforts and How He Gained Them* is better known than the original. Which is which?

"You are old, Father William," the young man cried;
"The few locks which are left you are gray;
You are hale, Father William—a hearty old man;
Now tell me the reason, I pray."

"In the days of my youth," Father William replied;
"I remembered that youth would fly fast,
And abused not my health and my vigour at first,
That I never might need them at last."

"You are old, father William," the young man said,
"And your hair has become very white;
And yet you incessantly stand on your head--
Do you think, at your age, it is right?"

"In my youth," father William replied to his son,
"I feared it might injure the brain;
But, now that I'm perfectly sure I have none,
Why, I do it again and again."

Two of Southey's narrative poems are more successful. The first is a memory from my childhood, as it was one of my mother's favourites.

[9] Sweetheart

The Battle of Blenheim
It was a summer evening,
Old Kaspar's work was done,
And he before his cottage door
Was sitting in the sun,
And by him sported on the green
His little grandchild Wilhemine.

She saw her brother Peterkin
Roll something large and round,
Which he beside the rivulet
In playing there had found;
He came to ask what he had found,
That was so large, and smooth, and round.

Old Kaspar took it from the boy,
Who stood expectant by;
And then the old man shook his head,
And with a natural sigh,
"'Tis some poor fellow's skull," said he,
"Who fell in the great victory.

"I find them in the garden,
For there's many here about;
And often when I go to plough,
The ploughshare turns them out!
For many thousand men," said he,
"Were slain in that great victory."

"Now tell us what 'twas all about,"
Young Peterkin, he cries;
And little Wilhemine looks up
With wonder-waiting eyes;
"Now tell us all about the war,
And what they fought each other for.

"It was the English," Kaspar cried,
"Who put the French to rout;
But what they fought each other for,
I could not well make out;
But everybody said," quoth he,
"That 'twas a famous victory." **……**

The Well of Saint Keyne
A Well there is in the west country,
And a clearer one never was seen;
There is not a wife in the west country
But has heard of the Well of St. Keyne.

An oak and an elm-tree stand beside,
And behind doth an ash-tree grow,

And a willow from the bank above
Droops to the water below.

A traveller came to the Well of St. Keyne;
Joyfully he drew nigh,
For from the cock-crow he had been travelling,
And there was not a cloud in the sky.

He drank of the water so cool and clear,
For thirsty and hot was he,
And he sat down upon the bank
Under the willow-tree.

There came a man from the house hard by
At the Well to fill his pail;
On the Well-side he rested it,
And he bade the Stranger hail.

"Now art thou a bachelor, Stranger?" quoth he,
"For an' if thou hast a wife,
The happiest draught thou hast drank this day
That ever thou didst in thy life.

"Or has thy good woman, if one thou hast,
Ever here in Cornwall been?
For an' if she have, I'll venture my life
She has drank of the Well of St. Keyne."

"I have left a good woman who never was here."
The Stranger he made reply,
"But that my draught should be the better for that,
I pray you answer me why?"

"St. Keyne," quoth the Cornish-man, "many a time
Drank of this crystal Well,
And before the Angel summoned her,
She laid on the water a spell.

"If the Husband of this gifted Well
Shall drink before his Wife,
A happy man thenceforth is he,
For he shall be Master for life.

"But if the Wife should drink of it first,--
God help the Husband then!"
The Stranger stoopt to the Well of St. Keyne,
And drank of the water again.

"You drank of the Well I warrant betimes?"
He to the Cornish-man said:
But the Cornish-man smiled as the Stranger spake,
And sheepishly shook his head.

"I hastened as soon as the wedding was done,
And left my Wife in the porch;
But i' faith she had been wiser than me,
For she took a bottle to Church."

T T T T

Talking of Lewis Carroll, one of the most famous adventures in narrative poetry is the slaying of the Jabberwock in *Through the Looking-Glass* (1872).

'Twas brillig, and the slithy toves
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe:
All mimsy were the borogoves,
And the mome raths outgrabe.

"Beware the Jabberwock, my son!
The jaws that bite, the claws that catch!
Beware the Jubjub bird, and shun
The frumious Bandersnatch!"

He took his vorpal sword in hand:
Long time the manxome foe he sought --
So rested he by the Tumtum tree,
And stood awhile in thought.

And, as in uffish thought he stood,
The Jabberwock, with eyes of flame,
Came whiffling through the tulgey wood,
And burbled as it came!

One, two! One, two! And through and through
The vorpal blade went snicker-snack!
He left it dead, and with its head
He went galumphing back.

"And, has thou slain the Jabberwock?
Come to my arms, my beamish boy!
O frabjous day! Callooh! Callay!'
He chortled in his joy.

'Twas brillig, and the slithy toves
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe;
All mimsy were the borogoves,
And the mome raths outgrabe.

This piece of nonsense verse with its highly onomatopoeic vocabulary (don't go looking for the words in the dictionary – just enjoy their sound) has proved to be a challenge to poets in other languages and has spawned many excellent translations.

Le Jaseroque - *Frank L. Warren*
Il brilgue: les tôves lubricilleux
Se gyrent en vrillant dans le guave.
Enmîmés sont les gougebosqueux
Et le mômerade horsgrave.

"Garde-toi du Jaseroque, mon fils!
La gueule qui mord; la griffe qui prend!
Garde-toi de l'oiseau Jube, évite
Le frumieux Band-à-prend!"

Son glaive vorpal en main il va-
T-à la recherche du fauve manscant;
Puis arrivé à l'arbre Té-Té,
Il y reste, réfléchissant.

Pendant qu'il pense, tout uffusé,
Le Jaseroque, à l'oeil flambant,
Vient siblant par le bois tullegeais,
Et burbule en venant.

Un deux, un deux, par le milieu,
Le glaive vorpal fait pat-à-pan!
La bête défaite, avec sa tête,
Il rentre gallomphant.

"As-tu tué le Jaseroque?
Viens à mon coeur, fils rayonnais!
Ô Jour frabbejeais! Calleau! Callai!"
Il cortule dans sa joie.

Il brilgue: les tôves lubricilleux
Se gyrent en vrillant dans le guave.
Enmîmés sont les gougebosqueux
Et le mômerade horsgrave.

Der Zipferlake - *Christian Enzensberger*
Verdaustig war's, und glasse Wieben
rotterten gorkicht im Gemank.
Gar elump war der Pluckerwank,
und die gabben Schweisel frieben.

"Hab acht vorm Zipferlak, mein Kind!
Sein Maul ist beiss, sein Griff ist bohr.
Vorm Fliegelflagel sieh dich vor,
dem mampfen Schnatterrind."

Er zückt' sein scharfgebifftes Schwert,
den Feind zu futzen ohne Saum,
und lehnt' sich an den Dudelbaum
und stand da lang in sich gekehrt.

In sich gekeimt, so stand er hier,
da kam verschnoff der Zipferlak
mit Flammenlefze angewackt
und gurgt' in seiner Gier.

Mit Eins! und Zwei! und bis auf's Bein!
Die biffe Klinge ritscheropf!
Trennt' er vom Hals den toten Kopf,
und wichernd sprengt' er heim.

"Vom Zipferlak hast uns befreit?
Komm an mein Herz, aromer Sohn!
Oh, blumer Tag! Oh, schlusse Fron!"
So kröpfte er vor Freud'.

Verdaustig war's, und glasse Wieben
rotterten gorkicht im Gemank.
Gar elump war der Pluckerwank,
und die gabben Schweisel frieben.

Il Ciarlestrone - *Adriana Crespi*
Era brillosto, e gli alacridi tossi
succhiellavano scabbi nel pantúle:
Méstili eran tutti i paparossi,
e strombavan musando i tartarocchi.

"Attento al Ciarlestrone, figlio mio!
Fauci che azzannano, fauci che ti artigliano,
attento all'uccel Giuggio e attento ancora
Al fumibondo chiappabana!"

Afferò quello la sua vorpi da lama
a lungo il manson nemico cercò...
Cosí sostò presso l'albero Touton
e riflettendo alquanto dimorò.

E mentre il bellico pensier si trattenea,
il Ciarlestrone con occhiali brage
venne sifflando nella fulgida selva,
sbollentando nella sua avanzata.

Бармаглот - *Д. Орловска*
Варкалось. Хливкие шорьки
Пырялись по наве.
И хрюкотали зелюки
Как мюмзики в мове.

О, бойся Бармаглота, сын!
Он так свиреп и дик,
А в глуще рымит исполин —
Злопастный Брандашмыг!

Но взял он меч, и взял он щит,
Высоких полон дум.
В глущобу путь его лежит,
Под дерево Тумтум.

Он стал под дерево и ждёт,
И вдруг граахнул гром —
Летит ужасный Бармаглот
И пылкает огнём!

Un, due! Un, due! E dentro e dentro
scattò saettante la vorpida lama!
Ei lo lasciò cadavere, e col capo
Se ne venne al ritorno galumpando.

"E hai tu ucciso il Ciarlestrone?
Fra le mie braccia, o raggioso fanciullo!
O giorno fragoroso, Callò, Callài!"
stripetò quello dala gioia.

Era brillosto, e gli alacridi tossi
succhiellavano scabbi nel pantúle:
Méstili eran tutti i paparossi,
e strombavan musando i tartarocchi.

Раз-два, раз-два! Горит трава,
Взы-взы — стрижает меч.
Ува! Ува! И голова
Барабардает с плеч!

О светозарный мальчик мой!
Ты победил в бою!
О храброславленный герой,
Хвалу тебе пою!

Варкалось. Хливкие шорьки
Пырялись по наве.
И хрюкотали зелюки
Как мюмзики в мове.

T T T T

Stephen Potter is back (Yes, Stephen, not Harry)

How to Humiliate Friends, One-Up Rivals and Pick Just the Wrong Gift

By Adam Cohen (New York Times, April 3, 2005)

When a young person visits, you should throw him off balance by saying, "You want a wash, I expect," in a way that suggests he has not quite mastered personal hygiene. An older man should be told how fine it is that his wife is still "moving very briskly about." And visitors of all ages should be encouraged to talk about their friends, after which you should say that you "wished B. was here" because you never tell "stories behind people's backs."

These pointers come from "Lifemanship," one of a series of acerbic life guides written by Stephen Potter in the 1940's and 1950's. "Lifemanship," which has just been reissued by Moyer Bell, wryly mocked Dale Carnegie's "How to Win Friends and Influence People," and other self-help manuals of its day. Potter's books do not focus on friendship or success, but on less exalted goals: "winning without actually cheating" ("Gamesmanship"); "creative intimidation" ("One-Upmanship"); and making "the other man feel that something has gone wrong, however slightly" ("Lifemanship").

The absurdist "Monty Python's Spamalot" may be the toast of Broadway, but it is Potter's caustic brand of British humor that is especially in step with our times. His targets - wine snobs, literary poseurs and weekend athletes - are more numerous today than a half-century ago. His major themes - the drive for self-improvement, competitiveness, faking it and sheer malice - are a virtual checklist of modern culture.

Potter, a onetime writer for the BBC, styled his writing as the research findings of the nonexistent Lifemanship Correspondence College, on topics like "How to Make People Feel Awkward." "Lifemanship" offers laboratory-tested techniques for excelling in cocktail party talk, no matter how uninformed you are. One tactic is "languaging up," which Potter defines as "to confuse, irritate and depress by the use of foreign words, fictitious or otherwise."

"Lifemanship" guides the reader through the important social milieus of an upper-class Briton of the middle 20th century. Its section on "Week-endmanship" offers strategies for outshining the other guests at a country house, while sloughing off as much as possible. One ploy is to

ostentatiously clear the table on Friday night and wash a few dishes - which, if done right, can ensure that you are not expected to lift a finger for the rest of the visit.

When a Lifeman is called on to write a book review on a subject he knows little about, the key is pretending to know more than the author. Potter recommends comments like, “I am surprised that Mr. Sprott does not give more credit, in the main body of his text, to that fine teacher and impeccable scholar Dr. Kalamesa of Joinstown.” This is “considered quite fair,” Potter says, “even if you have never seen the name of Kalamesa before, which of course you never will have, except in some footnote or appendix to Sprott's book.”

Potter began his series in 1947 with “Gamesmanship,” a word the Oxford English Dictionary credits him with coining. In that book, he made clear that appearing to win is at least as important as winning. But he also had advice for how to - as the O.E.D. defines the word he made up - win “by means that barely qualify as legitimate.” One strategy is “limpmanship,” which includes both the use of a minor injury to win difficult contests and, conversely, adapting a game when your opponent is injured in a way that, although apparently favoring your opponent's injury, “will yet benefit you in the end.”

Potter reached his creative zenith with “One-Upmanship,” which extended “upmanship” principles to everyday life. He offered shrewd advice for the would-be wine connoisseur. “A good general rule,” he says, “is to state that the bouquet is better than the taste, and vice versa.” When giving gifts, a main goal, he notes, is “to make the receiver feel there is some implied criticism.” For the middle-aged man who will not admit he needs glasses, he suggests a glasses case. Children can be tortured by giving them presents a year or two below their age group.

The humor of Potter's books is rooted in the British obsession with decorum, and reluctance to confront awkward truths. In a culture where such a premium is placed on keeping up appearances, there is particular sting to Potter's admonition that the ideal gift for a woman whose youth is fading is “patent food which announces clearly on the front label that it has been specially treated to be made more easily digestible.”

Beneath all the posing and the oblique put-downs, Potter's subject, gently approached though it is, is humiliation - how to dish it out and how to avoid being its target. It is a topic that resonates strongly in America today. On television, we watch admiringly as Donald Trump, Simon Cowell and an unending parade of bachelors, bachelorettes and “Survivor” tribesmen eject losers from the charmed circle. We are addicted to shameful falls from grace, like Martha Stewart's and Michael Jackson's. And at social occasions, toasts are being replaced by “roasts,” an invitation to tell mean-spirited stories about the honoree.

A half-century ago, Potter had an uncanny sense that modern life was headed in this direction. He was, of course, a parodist. It seems clear, in the end, that the real targets of his barbs are not the people who are one-upped, but would-be Lifemen and Gamesmen who feel the need to outdo each other so assiduously. What is undeniable, though, is that Potter's books are clever, and they make better gifts than a diet book or a bottle of mouthwash.

T T T T

Robert Browning was a master of narrative poetry. I have selected three of his poems: the first is justly famous for its wit, quirky rhythms and unexpected rhymes; the second is a splendid example of the “galloping” style; and the third probably one of the subtlest narrative poems ever written – the tale is in what is not said.

The Pied Piper of Hamelin: A Child’s Story

Hamelin Town’s in Brunswick,
By famous Hanover city;
The river Weser, deep and wide,
Washes its wall on the southern side;
A pleasanter spot you never spied;
But, when begins my ditty,
Almost five hundred years ago,
To see the townsfolk suffer so
From vermin, was a pity.

Rats!
They fought the dogs and killed the cats,
And bit the babies in the cradles,
And ate the cheeses out of the vats,
And licked the soup from the cook’s own ladles,
Split open the kegs of salted sprats,
Made nests inside men’s Sunday hats,
And even spoiled the women’s chats
By drowning their speaking
With shrieking and squeaking
In fifty different sharps and flats.

At last the people in a body
To the Town Hall came flocking:
“Tis clear,” cried they, “our Mayor’s a noddy;
And as for our Corporation - shocking
To think we buy gowns lined with ermine
For dolts that can’t or won’t determine
What’s best to rid us of our vermin!
You hope, because you’re old and obese,
To find in the furry civic robe ease?
Rouse up, sirs! Give your brains a racking
To find the remedy we’re lacking,
Or, sure as fate, we’ll send you packing!”
At this the Mayor and Corporation
Quaked with a mighty consternation.

An hour they sat in council;
At length the Mayor broke silence:
“For a guilder I’d my ermine gown sell,
I wish I were a mile hence!
It’s easy to bid one rack one’s brain -
I’m sure my poor head aches again,
I’ve scratched it so, and all in vain.
Oh, for a trap, a trap, a trap!”
Just as he said this, what should hap
At the chamber-door but a gentle tap?
“Bless us,” cried the Mayor, “What’s that?”
(With the Corporation as he sat,

Looking little though wondrous fat;
Nor brighter was his eye nor moister
Than a too-long-opened oyster,
Save when at noon his paunch grew mutinous
For a plate of turtle green and glutinous)
"Only a scraping of shoes on the mat?
Anything like the sound of a rat
Makes my heart go pit-a-pat!"

"Come in!" - the Mayor cried, looking bigger:
And in did come the strangest figure!
His queer long coat from heel to head
Was half of yellow and half of red,
And he himself was tall and thin,
With sharp blue eyes, each like a pin,
And light loose hair, yet swarthy skin,
No tuft on cheek nor beard on chin,
But lips where smiles went out and in;
There was no guessing his kith and kin:
And nobody could enough admire
The tall man and his quaint attire.
Quoth one: "It's as my great-grandsire,
Starting up at the Trump of Doom's tone,
Had walked this way from his painted tombstone!" **…….**

How They Brought The Good News From Ghent To Aix
I sprang to the stirrup, and Joris, and he:
I galloped, Dirck galloped, we galloped all three;
"Good speed !" cried the watch as the gate-bolts undrew;
"Speed" echoed the wall to us galloping through.
Behind shut the postern, the lights sank to rest,
And into the midnight we galloped abreast.

Not a word to each other: we kept the great pace--
Neck by neck, stride by stride, never changing our place;
I turned in my saddle and made its girths tight,
Then shortened each stirrup and set the pique right,
Rebuckled the check-strap, chained slacker the bit,
Nor galloped less steadily Roland a whit.

'Twas moonset at starting; but while we drew near
Lokeren, the cocks crew and twilight dawned clear;
At Boom a great yellow star came out to see;
At Dueffeld 'twas morning as plain as could be;
And from Mecheln church-steeple we heard the half-chime--
So Joris broke silence with "Yet there is time!"

At Aerschot up leaped of a sudden the sun,
And against him the cattle stood black every one,
To stare through the mist at us galloping past;
And I saw my stout galloper Roland at last,
With resolute shoulders, each butting away
The haze, as some bluff river headland its spray;

And his low head and crest, just one sharp ear bent back
For my voice, and the other pricked out on his track;
And one eye's black intelligence,--ever that glance
O'er its white edge at me, its own master, askance;
And the thick heavy spume-flakes, which aye and anon
His fierce lips shook upward in galloping on.

By Hasselt Dirck groaned; and cried Joris, "Stay spur!
Your Roos galloped bravely, the fault's not in her;
We'll remember at Aix"--for one heard the quick wheeze
Of her chest, saw the stretched neck, and the staggering knees
And sunk tail, and horrible heave of the flank,
As down on her haunches she shuddered and sank.

So we were left galloping, Joris and I,
Past Looz and past Tongres, no cloud in the sky;
The broad sun above laughed a pitiless laugh;
'Neath our feet broke the brittle, bright stubble like chaff;
Till over by Dalhem a dome-spire sprang white,
And "Gallop" gasped Joris, "for Aix is in sight!"

"How they'll greet us!"--and all in a moment his roan
Rolled neck and croup over, lay dead as a stone;
And there was my Roland to bear the whole weight
Of the news which alone could save Aix from her fate,
With her nostrils like pits full of blood to the brim,
And with circles of red for his eye-sockets' rim.

Then I cast loose my buff-coat, each holster let fall,
Shook off both my jack-boots, let go belt and all,
Stoop up in the stirrups, leaned, patted his ear,
Called my Roland his pet-name, my horse without peer--
Clapped my hands, laughed and sung, any noise, bad or good,
Till at length into Aix Roland galloped and stood.

And all I remember is friends flocking round,
As I sate with his head 'twixt my knees on the ground;
And no voice but was praising this Roland of mine,
As I poured down his throat our last measure of wine,
Which (the burgesses voted by common consent)
Was no more than his due who brought good news from Ghent.

My Last Duchess (*Ferrara, 15--)*
That's my last Duchess painted on the wall,
Looking as if she were alive. I call
That piece a wonder, now: Fra Pandolf's hands
Worked busily a day, and there she stands.
Will 't please you sit and look at her? I said

"Fra Pandolf" by design, for never read
Strangers like you that pictured countenance,
The depth and passion of its earnest glance,
But to myself they turned (since none puts by
The curtain I have drawn for you, but I)
And seemed as they would ask me, if they durst,
How such a glance came there; so, not the first
Are you to turn and ask thus. Sir, 'twas not
Her husband's presence only, called that spot
Of joy into the Duchess' cheek: perhaps
Fra Pandolf chanced to say "Her mantle laps
Over my lady's wrist too much," or "Paint
Must never hope to reproduce the faint
Half-flush that dies along her throat": such stuff
Was courtesy, she thought, and cause enough
For calling up that spot of joy. She had
A heart -- how shall I say? -- too soon made glad,
Too easily impressed; she liked whate'er
She looked on, and her looks went everywhere.
Sir, 'twas all one! My favour at her breast,
The dropping of the daylight in the West,
The bough of cherries some officious fool
Broke in the orchard for her, the white mule
She rode with round the terrace -- all and each
Would draw from her alike the approving speech,
Or blush, at least. She thanked men -- good! but thanked
Somehow -- I know not how -- as if she ranked
My gift of a nine-hundred-years-old name
With anybody's gift. Who'd stoop to blame
This sort of trifling? Even had you skill
In speech -- which I have not -- to make your will
Quite clear to such an one, and say, "Just this
Or that in you disgusts me; here you miss,
Or there exceed the mark" -- and if she let
Herself be lessoned so, nor plainly set
Her wits to yours, forsooth, and made excuse
-- E'en then would be some stooping; and I choose
Never to stoop. Oh sir, she smiled, no doubt,
Whene'er I passed her; but who passed without
Much the same smile? This grew; I gave commands;
Then all smiles stopped together. There she stands
As if alive. Will 't please you rise? We'll meet
The company below, then. I repeat,
The Count your master's known munificence
Is ample warrant that no just pretense
Of mine for dowry will be disallowed;
Though his fair daughter's self as I avowed
At starting, is my object. Nay, we'll go
Together down, sir. Notice Neptune, though,
Taming a sea horse, thought a rarity,
Which Claus of Innsbruck cast in bronze for me!

T T T T

Pass the Port

The following were voted the two funniest jokes in a survey carried out in 2001 by psychologist Dr. Richard Wiseman, of the University of Hertfordshire, in collaboration with the British Association for the Advancement of Science as part of a UK Government initiative to raise awareness of science among young people.[10] Judge for yourself.

A couple of New Jersey hunters are out in the woods when one of them falls to the ground. He doesn't seem to be breathing, his eyes are rolled back in his head. The other guy whips out his cell phone and calls the emergency services. He gasps to the operator: "My friend is dead! What can I do?" The operator, in a calm soothing voice says: "Just take it easy. I can help. First, let's make sure he's dead." There is a silence, then a shot is heard. The guy's voice comes back on the line. He says: "OK, now what?"

Sherlock Holmes and Dr Watson go on a camping trip. After a good dinner and a bottle of wine, they retire for the night, and go to sleep. Some hours later, Holmes wakes up and nudges his faithful friend. "Watson, look up at the sky and tell me what you see."
"I see millions and millions of stars, Holmes" replies Watson.
"And what do you deduce from that?"
Watson ponders for a minute. "Well, astronomically, it tells me that there are millions of galaxies and potentially billions of planets. Astrologically, I observe that Saturn is in Leo. Horologically, I deduce that the time is approximately a quarter past three. Meteorologically, I suspect that we will have a beautiful day tomorrow. Theologically, I can see that God is all powerful, and that we are a small and insignificant part of the universe. What does it tell you, Holmes?"
Holmes is silent for a moment. "Watson, you idiot!" he says. "Someone has stolen our tent!"

T T T T

Here are some other famous narrative poems – perhaps hackneyed by repetition and rote learning in our schools, but nonetheless stirring and full of atmosphere.

From **The Rime of the Ancient Mariner** – *Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834)*

…… The fair breeze blew, the white foam flew,
The furrow followed free;
We were the first that ever burst
Into that silent sea.

Down dropt the breeze, the sails dropt down,
'Twas sad as sad could be;
And we did speak only to break
The silence of the sea!

[10] No, this is not a hoax – see http://www.laughlab.co.uk/summary.html.

All in a hot and copper sky,
The bloody Sun, at noon,
Right up above the mast did stand,
No bigger than the Moon.

Day after day, day after day,
We stuck, nor breath nor motion;
As idle as a painted ship
Upon a painted ocean.

Water, water, every where,
And all the boards did shrink;
Water, water, every where,
Nor any drop to drink.

The very deep did rot: O Christ!
That ever this should be!
Yea, slimy things did crawl with legs
Upon the slimy sea.

About, about, in reel and rout
The death-fires danced at night;
The water, like a witch's oils,
Burnt green, and blue and white.

And some in dreams assurèd were
Of the Spirit that plagued us so;
Nine fathom deep he had followed us
From the land of mist and snow.

And every tongue, through utter drought,
Was withered at the root;
We could not speak, no more than if
We had been choked with soot.

From **Childe Harold's Pilgrimage** - *George Gordon Lord Byron (1788-1824)*
There was a sound of revelry by night,
And Belgium's capital had gathered then
Her Beauty and her Chivalry, and bright
The lamps shone o'er fair women and brave men;
A thousand hearts beat happily; and when
Music arose with its voluptuous swell,
Soft eyes looked love to eyes which spake again,
And all went merry as a marriage-bell;
But hush! hark! a deep sound strikes like a rising knell!
Did ye not hear it?--No; 'twas but the wind,
Or the car rattling o'er the stony street;
On with the dance! let joy be unconfined;
No sleep till morn, when Youth and Pleasure meet
To chase the glowing Hours with flying feet--
But, hark!--that heavy sound breaks in once more,
As if the clouds its echo would repeat;
And nearer, clearer, deadlier than before!
Arm! Arm! and out--it is--the cannon's opening roar!

Within a windowed niche of that high hall
Sate Brunswick's fated chieftain; he did hear
That sound the first amidst the festival,
And caught its tone with Death's prophetic ear;
And when they smiled because he deemed it near,
His heart more truly knew that peal too well
Which stretched his father on a bloody bier,
And roused the vengeance blood alone could quell:
He rushed into the field, and, foremost fighting, fell.

Ah! then and there was hurrying to and fro,
And gathering tears, and tremblings of distress,
And cheeks all pale, which but an hour ago
Blushed at the praise of their own loveliness;
And there were sudden partings, such as press
The life from out young hearts, and choking sighs
Which ne'er might be repeated; who could guess
If ever more should meet those mutual eyes,
Since upon nights so sweet such awful morn could rise?

And there was mounting in hot haste: the steed,
The mustering squadron, and the clattering car,
Went pouring forward in impetuous speed,
And swiftly forming in the ranks of war;
And the deep thunder peal on peal afar;
And near, the beat of the alarming drum
Roused up the soldier ere the morning star;
While thronged the citizens with terror dumb,
Or whispering, with white lips—'The foe! They come! they come!' **……**

And Ardennes waves above them her green leaves,
Dewy with nature's tear-drops, as they pass,
Grieving, if aught inanimate e'er grieves,
Over the unreturning brave,--alas!
Ere evening to be trodden like the grass
Which now beneath them, but above shall grow
In its next verdure, when this fiery mass
Of living valour, rolling on the foe
And burning with high hope, shall moulder cold and low.

Last noon beheld them full of lusty life,
Last eve in Beauty's circle proudly gay,
The midnight brought the signal-sound of strife,
The morn the marshalling in arms,--the day
Battle's magnificently-stern array!
The thunder-clouds close o'er it, which when rent
The earth is covered thick with other clay,

Which her own clay shall cover, heaped and pent,
Rider and horse,--friend, foe,--in one red burial blent!

The Listeners - *Walter de la Mare (1873-1953)*
"Is there anybody there?" said the Traveller,
Knocking on the moonlit door;
And his horse in the silence champed the grasses
Of the forest's ferny floor.
And a bird flew up out of the turret,
Above the Traveller's head:
And he smote upon the door again a second time;
'Is there anybody there?' he said.
But no one descended to the Traveller;
No head from the leaf-fringed sill
Leaned over and looked into his grey eyes,
Where he stood perplexed and still.
But only a host of phantom listeners
That dwelt in the lone house then
Stood listening in the quiet of the moonlight
To that voice from the world of men:
Stood thronging the faint moonbeams on the dark stair,
That goes down to the empty hall,
Hearkening in an air stirred and shaken
By the lonely Traveller's call.
And he felt in his heart their strangeness,
Their stillness answering his cry,
While his horse moved, cropping the dark turf,
'Neath the starred and leafy sky;
For he suddenly smote on the door, even
Louder, and lifted his head:
"Tell them I came, and no one answered,
That I kept my word," he said.
Never the least stir made the listeners,
Though every word he spake
Fell echoing through the shadowiness of the still house
From the one man left awake:
Ay, they heard his foot upon the stirrup,
And the sound of iron on stone,
And how the silence surged softly backward,
When the plunging hoofs were gone.

The Highwayman - *Alfred Noyes (1880-1958)*
The wind was a torrent of darkness upon the gusty trees,
The moon was a ghostly galleon tossed upon cloudy seas,
The road was a ribbon of moonlight looping the purple moor,
And the highwayman came riding--
Riding--riding--
The highwayman came riding, up to the old inn door.

He'd a French cocked hat on his forehead, and a bunch of lace at his chin;
He'd a coat of the claret velvet, and breeches of fine doe-skin.
They fitted with never a wrinkle; his boots were up to his thigh!
And he rode with a jeweled twinkle--
His rapier hilt a-twinkle--
His pistol butts a-twinkle, under the jeweled sky.

Over the cobbles he clattered and clashed in the dark inn-yard,
He tapped with his whip on the shutters, but all was locked and barred,
He whistled a tune to the window, and who should be waiting there
But the landlord's black-eyed daughter--
Bess, the landlord's daughter--
Plaiting a dark red love-knot into her long black hair.

Dark in the dark old inn-yard a stable-wicket creaked
Where Tim, the ostler listened--his face was white and peaked--
His eyes were hollows of madness, his hair like mouldy hay,
But he loved the landlord's daughter--
The landlord's black-eyed daughter;
Dumb as a dog he listened, and he heard the robber say:

"One kiss, my bonny sweetheart; I'm after a prize tonight,
But I shall be back with the yellow gold before the morning light.
Yet if they press me sharply, and harry me through the day,
Then look for me by moonlight,
Watch for me by moonlight,
I'll come to thee by moonlight, though hell should bar the way." **……**

T T T T

In the early 20th century, J. Milton Hayes and Cuthbert Clarke combined their talents in composing a number of popular songs - as far as I know, Hayes was solely responsible for the lyrics. Some of them make rollicking narrative poetry.

The Green Eye of the Yellow God
There's a one-eyed yellow idol to the north of Khatmandu,
There's a little marble cross below the town;
There's a broken-hearted woman tends the grave of Mad Carew,
And the Yellow God forever gazes down.

He was known as "Mad Carew" by the subs at Khatmandu,
He was hotter than they felt inclined to tell;
But for all his foolish pranks, he was worshipped in the ranks,
And the Colonel's daughter smiled on him as well.

He had loved her all along, with a passion of the strong,
The fact that she loved him was plain to all.
She was nearly twenty-one and arrangements had begun
To celebrate her birthday with a ball.

He wrote to ask what present she would like from Mad Carew;
They met next day as he dismissed a squad;
And jestingly she told him then that nothing else would do

But the green eye of the little Yellow God.

On the night before the dance, Mad Carew seemed in a trance,
And they chaffed him as they puffed at their cigars;
But for once he failed to smile, and he sat alone awhile,
Then went out into the night beneath the stars.

He returned before the dawn, with his shirt and tunic torn,
And a gash across his temple dripping red;
He was patched up right away, and he slept through all the day,
And the Colonel's daughter watched beside his bed.

He woke at last and asked if they could send his tunic through;
She brought it, and he thanked her with a nod;
He bade her search the pocket saying, "That's from Mad Carew,"
And she found the little green eye of the god.

She upbraided poor Carew in the way that women do,
Though both her eyes were strangely hot and wet;
But she wouldn't take the stone and Mad Carew was left alone
With the jewel that he'd chanced his life to get.

When the ball was at its height, on that still and tropic night,
She thought of him and hastened to his room;
As she crossed the barrack square she could hear the dreamy air
Of a waltz tune softly stealing thro' the gloom.

His door was open wide, with silver moonlight shining through;
The place was wet and slipp'ry where she trod;
An ugly knife lay buried in the heart of Mad Carew,
'Twas the "Vengeance of the Little Yellow God."

There's a one-eyed yellow idol to the north of Khatmandu
There's a little marble cross below the town;
There's a broken-hearted woman tends the grave of Mad Carew,
And the Yellow God forever gazes down.

T T T T

In *Christmas Pudding 2001*, I reviewed John Train's *Remarkable Names of Real People* and added a few of my own. Here is another: Jacques-Roger Booh-Booh, Special Representative of the UN Secretary General in Rwanda (Nov 1993 - Jun 1994) – not an auspicious name for Rwanda at that time.

T T T T

Novelists and authors of short-stories often write good narrative poetry.

Lochinvar - *Sir Walter Scott (1771-1832)*
O, young Lochinvar is come out of the west,
Through all the wide Border his steed was the best;
And save his good broadsword, he weapons had none,
He rode all unarmed, and he rode all alone.

So faithful in love, and so dauntless in war,
There never was knight like the young Lochinvar.

He staid not for brake, and he stopped not for stone,
He swam the Eske river where ford there was none;
But ere he alighted at Netherby gate,
The bride had consented, the gallant came late:
For a laggard in love, and a dastard in war,
Was to wed the fair Ellen of brave Lochinvar.

So boldly he entered the Netherby Hall,
Among bride's-men, and kinsmen, and brothers, and all:
Then spoke the bride's father, his hand on his sword,
(For the poor craven bridegroom said never a word,)
"O come ye in peace here, or come ye in war,
Or to dance at our bridal, young Lord Lochinvar?"--

"I long wooed your daughter, my suit you denied;--
Love swells like the Solway, but ebbs like its tide--
And now am I come, with this lost love of mine,
To lead but one measure, drink one cup of wine.
There are maidens in Scotland more lovely by far,
That would gladly be bride to the young Lochinvar."
The bride kissed the goblet; the knight took it up,
He quaffed off the wine, and he threw down the cup.

She looked down to blush, and she looked up to sigh,
With a smile on her lips, and a tear in her eye.
He took her soft hand, ere her mother could bar,--
"Now tread we a measure!" said young Lochinvar.
So stately his form, and so lovely her face,
That never a hall such a galliard did grace;
While her mother did fret, and her father did fume,
And the bridegroom stood dangling his bonnet and plume;
And the bride-maidens whispered, "'Twere better by far
To have matched our fair cousin with young Lochinvar."

One touch to her hand, and one word in her ear,
When they reached the hall-door, and the charger stood near;
So light to the croupe the fair lady he swung,
So light to the saddle before her he sprung!
"She is won! we are gone, over bank, bush, and scaur;
They'll have fleet steeds that follow," quoth young Lochinvar.
There was mounting 'mong Graemes of the Netherby clan;
Forsters, Fenwicks, and Musgraves, they rode and they ran:
There was racing and chasing, on Cannobie Lee,
But the lost bride of Netherby ne'er did they see.
So daring in love, and so dauntless in war,
Have ye e'er heard of gallant like young Lochinvar?

From **The "Mary Gloster"** - *Rudyard Kipling (1865-1936)*
I've paid for your sickest fancies; I've humoured your crackedest whim --
Dick, it's your daddy, dying; you've got to listen to him!
Good for a fortnight, am I? The doctor told you? He lied.
I shall go under by morning, and -- Put that nurse outside.
'Never seen death yet, Dickie? Well, now is your time to learn,
And you'll wish you held my record before it comes to your turn.
Not counting the Line and the Foundry, the yards and the village, too,
I've made myself and a million; but I'm damned if I made you.
Master at two-and-twenty, and married at twenty-three --
Ten thousand men on the pay-roll, and forty freighters at sea!
Fifty years between 'em, and every year of it fight,
And now I'm Sir Anthony Gloster, dying, a baronite:
For I lunched with his Royal 'Ighness -- what was it the papers had?
"Not the least of our merchant-princes." Dickie, that's me, your dad!
I didn't begin with askings. I took my job and I stuck;
I took the chances they wouldn't, an' now they're calling it luck.
Lord, what boats I've handled -- rotten and leaky and old --
Ran 'em, or -- opened the bilge-cock, precisely as I was told.
Grub that 'ud bind you crazy, and crews that 'ud turn you grey,
And a big fat lump of insurance to cover the risk on the way.
The others they dursn't do it; they said they valued their life
(They've served me since as skippers). I went, and I took my wife. **……..**

From **Lepanto** - *G.K. Chesterton (1874-1936)*
White founts falling in the courts of the sun,
And the Soldan of Byzantium is smiling as they run;
There is laughter like the fountains in that face of all men feared,
It stirs the forest darkness, the darkness of his beard,
It curls the blood-red crescent, the crescent of his lips,
For the inmost sea of all the earth is shaken with his ships.
They have dared the white republics up the capes of Italy,
They have dashed the Adriatic round the Lion of the Sea,
And the Pope has cast his arms abroad for agony and loss,
And called the kings of Christendom for swords about the Cross,
The cold queen of England is looking in the glass;
The shadow of the Valois is yawning at the Mass;
From evening isles fantastical rings faint the Spanish gun,
And the Lord upon the Golden Horn is laughing in the sun.
Dim drums throbbing, in the hills half heard,
Where only on a nameless throne a crownless prince has stirred,
Where, risen from a doubtful seat and half-attainted stall,
The last knight of Europe takes weapons from the wall,
The last and lingering troubadour to whom the bird has sung,
That once went singing southward when all the world was young.
In that enormous silence, tiny and unafraid,
Comes up along a winding road the noise of the Crusade.
Strong gongs groaning as the guns boom far,
Don John of Austria is going to the war,
Stiff flags straining in the night-blasts cold
In the gloom black-purple, in the glint old-gold,
Torchlight crimson on the copper kettle-drums,
Then the tuckets, then the trumpets, then the cannon, and he comes.
Don John laughing in the brave beard curled,
Spurning of his stirrups like the thrones of all the world,
Holding his head up for a flag of all the free.
Love-light of Spain - hurrah!
Death-light of Africa!
Don John of Austria
Is riding to the sea.
Mahound is in his paradise above the evening star,
(*Don John of Austria is going to the war.*)
He moves a mighty turban on the timeless houri's knees,
His turban that is woven of the sunset and the seas.
He shakes the peacock gardens as he rises from his ease,
And he strides among the tree-tops and is taller than the trees,
And his voice through all the garden is a thunder sent to bring
Black Azrael and Ariel and Ammon on the wing.
Giants and the Genii,
Multiplex of wing and eye,
Whose strong obedience broke the sky
When Solomon was king.
They rush in red and purple from the red clouds of the morn,
From temples where the yellow gods shut up their eyes in scorn;
They rise in green robes roaring from the green hells of the sea
Where fallen skies and evil hues and eyeless creatures be;
On them the sea-valves cluster and the grey sea-forests curl,
Splashed with a splendid sickness, the sickness of the pearl;
They swell in sapphire smoke out of the blue cracks of the ground, -
They gather and they wonder and give worship to Mahound. **…….**

T T T T

In *Christmas Pudding 2000*, I recommended *Intellectual Impostures – Postmodern philosophers' abuse of science* by Alan Sokal and Jean Bricmont, (Profile Books, 1998). As a confirmation of their basic theory of the impenetrability of much (pseudo-) scientific discourse, I offer the following from the April 16, 2005 edition of *The Guardian*.

Making a science out of applied idiocy – by Richard Jinman

The research paper was clearly the work of experts. It had a long, baffling title and its authors were familiar with key topics such as "simulated annealing" and "flexible modalities". Submitted to the *World Multiconference on Systematics, Cybernetics and Informatics (WMSCI)*, a computer science event to be held in Florida in July, it was promptly selected for presentation.

There was just one problem: it was complete gibberish. A random collection of charts, diagrams and obtuse lines such as "We implemented our scatter/gather I/O server in Simula-67", it was generated by a computer program written by three Massachusetts Institute of Technology students.

MIT graduate student Jeremy Stribling, 25, and two friends created the fake paper because they were tired of being sent emails by WMSCI organisers soliciting admissions. Mr Stribling said he was "definitely surprised" when *Rooter: A Methodology for the Typical Unification of Access Points and Redundancy*, was accepted, but "we kind of suspected they had low standards". He added: "They ask for submissions, but once you get in you have to pay a $400 (£220) fee to have your paper published." The prank had been aimed at the WMSCI and was not a statement about jargon in computer science.

T T T T

The poetry of the New World is rich in narrative tradition. Here are a few of the best.

From **Hiawatha** - *Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1807-1882)*
(Illustration by John Rea Neill from the 1909 edition)

By the shore of Gitche Gumee,
By the shining Big-Sea-Water,
At the doorway of his wigwam,
In the pleasant Summer morning,
Hiawatha stood and waited.
All the air was full of freshness,
All the earth was bright and joyous,
And before him, through the sunshine,
Westward toward the neighboring forest
Passed in golden swarms the Ahmo,
Passed the bees, the honey-makers,
Burning, singing in the sunshine.
Bright above him shone the heavens,
Level spread the lake before him;
From its bosom leaped the sturgeon,
Sparkling, flashing in the sunshine;
On its margin the great forest
Stood reflected in the water,
Every tree-top had its shadow,
Motionless beneath the water.

The Raven - *Edgar Allen Poe (1809-1849)*
Once upon a midnight dreary, while I pondered weak and weary,
Over many a quaint and curious volume of forgotten lore,
While I nodded, nearly napping, suddenly there came a tapping,
As of some one gently rapping, rapping at my chamber door.
'"Tis some visitor,' I muttered, 'tapping at my chamber door -
Only this, and nothing more.'

Ah, distinctly I remember it was in the bleak December,
And each separate dying ember wrought its ghost upon the floor.
Eagerly I wished the morrow; - vainly I had sought to borrow
From my books surcease of sorrow - sorrow for the lost Lenore -
For the rare and radiant maiden whom the angels named Lenore -
Nameless here for evermore.

And the silken sad uncertain rustling of each purple curtain
Thrilled me - filled me with fantastic terrors never felt before;
So that now, to still the beating of my heart, I stood repeating
'"Tis some visitor entreating entrance at my chamber door -
Some late visitor entreating entrance at my chamber door; -
This it is, and nothing more,'

Presently my soul grew stronger; hesitating then no longer,
'Sir,' said I, 'or Madam, truly your forgiveness I implore;
But the fact is I was napping, and so gently you came rapping,
And so faintly you came tapping, tapping at my chamber door,
That I scarce was sure I heard you' - here I opened wide the door; -
Darkness there, and nothing more.

Deep into that darkness peering, long I stood there wondering, fearing,
Doubting, dreaming dreams no mortal ever dared to dream before
But the silence was unbroken, and the darkness gave no token,
And the only word there spoken was the whispered word, 'Lenore!'
This I whispered, and an echo murmured back the word, 'Lenore!'
Merely this and nothing more. **……..**

From **The Midnight Ride Of Paul Revere** - *Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1807-1882)*
Listen, my children, and you shall hear
Of the midnight ride of Paul Revere,
On the eighteenth of April, in Seventy-five;
Hardly a man is now alive
Who remembers that famous day and year

He said to his friend, "If the British march
By land or sea from the town to-night,
Hang a lantern aloft in the belfry arch
Of the North Church tower as a signal light,-

One if by land, and two if by sea;
And I on the opposite shore will be,
Ready to ride and spread the alarm
Through every Middlesex village and farm,
For the country folk to be up and to arm."

Then he said "Good-night!" and with muffled oar
Silently rowed to the Charlestown shore,
Just as the moon rose over the bay,
Where swinging wide at her moorings lay
The Somerset, British man-of-war;
A phantom ship, with each mast and spar
Across the moon like a prison bar,
And a huge black hulk, that was magnified
By its own reflection in the tide.

Meanwhile, his friend through alley and street

Wanders and watches, with eager ears,
Till in the silence around him he hears
The muster of men at the barrack door,
The sound of arms, and the tramp of feet,
And the measured tread of the grenadiers,
Marching down to their boats on the shore.

Then he climbed the tower of the Old North Church,
By the wooden stairs, with stealthy tread,
To the belfry chamber overhead,
And startled the pigeons from their perch
On the sombre rafters, that round him made
Masses and moving shapes of shade,
By the trembling ladder, steep and tall,
To the highest window in the wall,
Where he paused to listen and look down
A moment on the roofs of the town
And the moonlight flowing over all.

Beneath, in the churchyard, lay the dead,
In their night encampment on the hill,
Wrapped in silence so deep and still
That he could hear, like a sentinel's tread,
The watchful night-wind, as it went
Creeping along from tent to tent,
And seeming to whisper, "All is well!"
A moment only he feels the spell
Of the place and the hour, and the secret dread
Of the lonely belfry and the dead;
For suddenly all his thoughts are bent
On a shadowy something far away,
Where the river widens to meet the bay,
A line of black that bends and floats
On the rising tide like a bridge of boats.

The Shooting of Dan McGrew - *Robert W. Service (1874-1958)*
A bunch of the boys were whooping it up in the Malamute saloon;
The kid that handles the music-box was hitting a jag-time tune;
Back of the bar, in a solo game, sat Dangerous Dan McGrew,
And watching his luck was his light-o'-love, the lady that's known as Lou.

When out of the night, which was fifty below, and into the din and the glare,
There stumbled a miner fresh from the creeks, dog-dirty, and loaded for bear.
He looked like a man with a foot in the grave and scarcely the strength of a louse,
Yet he tilted a poke of dust on the bar, and he called for drinks for the house.
There was none could place the stranger's face, though we searched ourselves for a clue;
But we drank his health, and the last to drink was Dangerous Dan McGrew.

There's men that somehow just grip your eyes, and hold them hard like a spell;
And such was he, and he looked to me like a man who had lived in hell;
With a face most hair, and the dreary stare of a dog whose day is done,
As he watered the green stuff in his glass, and the drops fell one by one.
Then I got to figgering who he was, and wondering what he'd do,
And I turned my head -- and there watching him was the lady that's known as Lou.

His eyes went rubbering round the room, and he seemed in a kind of daze,
Till at last that old piano fell in the way of his wandering gaze.
The rag-time kid was having a drink; there was no one else on the stool,
So the stranger stumbles across the room, and flops down there like a fool.
In a buckskin shirt that was glazed with dirt he sat, and I saw him sway;
Then he clutched the keys with his talon hands -- my God! but that man could play.

Were you ever out in the Great Alone, when the moon was awful clear,
And the icy mountains hemmed you in with a silence you 'most could hear;
With only the howl of a timber wolf, and you camped there in the cold,
A half-dead thing in a stark, dead world, clean mad for the muck called gold;
While high overhead, green, yellow and red, the North Lights swept in bars? --
Then you've a hunch what the music meant. . . hunger and night and the stars.

And hunger not of the belly kind, that's banished with bacon and beans,
But the gnawing hunger of lonely men for a home and all that it means;
For a fireside far from the cares that are, four walls and a roof above;
But oh! so cramful of cosy joy, and crowned with a woman's love --
A woman dearer than all the world, and true as Heaven is true --
(God! how ghastly she looks through her rouge, -- the lady that's known as Lou.)

Then on a sudden the music changed, so soft that you scarce could hear;
But you felt that your life had been looted clean of all that it once held dear;
That someone had stolen the woman you loved; that her love was a devil's lie;
That your guts were gone, and the best for you was to crawl away and die.
'Twas the crowning cry of a heart's despair, and it thrilled you through and through –
"I guess I'll make it a spread misere", said Dangerous Dan McGrew.

The music almost died away ... then it burst like a pent-up flood;
And it seemed to say, "Repay, repay," and my eyes were blind with blood.
The thought came back of an ancient wrong, and it stung like a frozen lash,
And the lust awoke to kill, to kill ... then the music stopped with a crash,
And the stranger turned, and his eyes they burned in a most peculiar way;
In a buckskin shirt that was glazed with dirt he sat, and I saw him sway;
Then his lips went in in a kind of grin, and he spoke, and his voice was calm,
And "Boys," says he, "you don't know me, and none of you care a damn;
But I want to state, and my words are straight, and I'll bet my poke they're true,
That one of you is a hound of hell. . .and that one is Dan McGrew."

Then I ducked my head, and the lights went out, and two guns blazed in the dark,
And a woman screamed, and the lights went up, and two men lay stiff and stark.
Pitched on his head, and pumped full of lead, was Dangerous Dan McGrew,
While the man from the creeks lay clutched to the breast of the lady that's known as Lou.

These are the simple facts of the case, and I guess I ought to know.
They say that the stranger was crazed with "hooch," and I'm not denying it's so.

I'm not so wise as the lawyer guys, but strictly between us two --
The woman that kissed him and -- pinched his poke -- was the lady that's known as Lou.

Clancy of the Overflow - *Andrew Barton ('Banjo') Paterson (1864-1941)*
I had written him a letter which I had, for want of better
Knowledge, sent to where I met him down the Lachlan, years ago,
He was shearing when I knew him, so I sent the letter to him,
Just "on spec", addressed as follows, "Clancy, of The Overflow".

And an answer came directed in a writing unexpected,
(And I think the same was written with a thumb-nail dipped in tar)
'Twas his shearing mate who wrote it, and verbatim I will quote it:
"Clancy's gone to Queensland droving, and we don't know where he are."

In my wild erratic fancy visions come to me of Clancy
Gone a-droving "down the Cooper" where the Western drovers go;
As the stock are slowly stringing, Clancy rides behind them singing,
For the drover's life has pleasures that the townsfolk never know.

And the bush hath friends to meet him, and their kindly voices greet him
In the murmur of the breezes and the river on its bars,
And he sees the vision splendid of the sunlit plains extended,
And at night the wondrous glory of the everlasting stars.

I am sitting in my dingy little office, where a stingy
Ray of sunlight struggles feebly down between the houses tall,
And the foetid air and gritty of the dusty, dirty city,
Through the open window floating, spreads its foulness over all.

And in place of lowing cattle, I can hear the fiendish rattle
Of the tramways and the 'buses making hurry down the street,
And the language uninviting of the gutter children fighting,
Comes fitfully and faintly through the ceaseless tramp of feet.

And the hurrying people daunt me, and their pallid faces haunt me
As they shoulder one another in their rush and nervous haste,
With their eager eyes and greedy, and their stunted forms and weedy,
For townsfolk have no time to grow, they have no time to waste.

And I somehow rather fancy that I'd like to change with Clancy,
Like to take a turn at droving where the seasons come and go,
While he faced the round eternal of the cash-book and the journal --
But I doubt he'd suit the office, Clancy, of "The Overflow".

Ben Duggan - *Henry Lawson (1867-1922)*
Jack Denver died on Talbragar when Christmas Eve began,
And there was sorrow round the place, for Denver was a man;
Jack Denver's wife bowed down her head -- her daughter's grief was wild,
And big Ben Duggan by the bed stood sobbing like a child.
But big Ben Duggan saddled up, and galloped fast and far,
To raise the longest funeral ever seen on Talbragar.

By station home
And shearing shed
Ben Duggan cried, 'Jack Denver's dead!
Roll up at Talbragar!'

He borrowed horses here and there, and rode all Christmas Eve,
And scarcely paused a moment's time the mournful news to leave;
He rode by lonely huts and farms, and when the day was done
He turned his panting horse's head and rode to Ross's Run.
No bushman in a single day had ridden half so far
Since Johnson brought the doctor to his wife at Talbragar.

By diggers' camps
Ben Duggan sped --
At each he cried, 'Jack Denver's dead!
Roll up at Talbragar!'

That night he passed the humpies of the splitters on the ridge,
And roused the bullock-drivers camped at Belinfante's Bridge;
And as he climbed the ridge again the moon shone on the rise;
The soft white moonbeams glistened in the tears that filled his eyes;
He dashed the rebel drops away -- for blinding things they are --
But 'twas his best and truest friend who died on Talbragar.

At Blackman's Run
Before the dawn,
Ben Duggan cried, 'Poor Denver's gone!
Roll up at Talbragar!'

At all the shanties round the place they'd heard his horse's tramp,
He took the track to Wilson's Luck, and told the diggers' camp;
But in the gorge by Deadman's Gap the mountain shades were black,
And there a newly-fallen tree was lying on the track --
He saw too late, and then he heard the swift hoof's sudden jar,
And big Ben Duggan ne'er again rode home to Talbragar.

'The wretch is drunk,
And Denver's dead --
A burning shame!' the people said
Next day at Talbragar.

For thirty miles round Talbragar the boys rolled up in strength,
And Denver had a funeral a good long mile in length;
Round Denver's grave that Christmas day rough bushmen's eyes were dim --
The western bushmen knew the way to bury dead like him;
But some returning homeward found, by light of moon and star,
Ben Duggan dying in the rocks, five miles from Talbragar.

They knelt around,
He raised his head
And faintly gasped, 'Jack Denver's dead,
Roll up at Talbragar!'

But one short hour before he died he woke to understand,
They told him, when he asked them, that the funeral was 'grand';
And then there came into his eyes a strange victorious light,
He smiled on them in triumph, and his great soul took its flight.
And still the careless bushmen tell by tent and shanty bar
How Duggan raised a funeral years back on Talbragar.

And far and wide
When Duggan died,
The bushmen of the western side
Rode in to Talbragar.

Casey At The Bat - *Ernest L. Thayer (1863-1940)*[11]
The outlook wasn't brilliant for the Mudville nine that day,
The score stood four to two, with but one inning more to play.
And then when Cooney died at first, and Barrows did the same,
A pall-like silence fell upon the patrons of the game.

A straggling few got up to go in deep despair.
The rest clung to that hope which springs eternal in the human breast.
They thought, "if only Casey could but get a whack at that.
We'd put up even money now, with Casey at the bat."

But Flynn preceded Casey, as did also Jimmy Blake;
and the former was a hoodoo, while the latter was a cake.
So upon that stricken multitude, grim melancholy sat;
for there seemed but little chance of Casey getting to the bat.

But Flynn let drive a single, to the wonderment of all.
And Blake, the much despised, tore the cover off the ball.
And when the dust had lifted, and men saw what had occurred,
there was Jimmy safe at second and Flynn a-hugging third.

Then from five thousand throats and more there rose a lusty yell;
it rumbled through the valley, it rattled in the dell;
it pounded through on the mountain and recoiled upon the flat;
for Casey, mighty Casey, was advancing to the bat.

There was ease in Casey's manner as he stepped into his place,
there was pride in Casey's bearing and a smile lit Casey's face.
And when, responding to the cheers, he lightly doffed his hat,
no stranger in the crowd could doubt 'twas Casey at the bat.

Ten thousand eyes were on him as he rubbed his hands with dirt.
Five thousand tongues applauded when he wiped them on his shirt.

[11] Thayer was amazed at the success this piece of occasional verse enjoyed – it was literally thrown together in one afternoon, sandwiched between two articles he was writing for the San Francisco *Examiner*. There is indeed very little good poetry about sports and Thayer's poem deals with a subject of great national importance. It is such a well-crafted pastiche that it is hard to dismiss it as just doggerel. (See http://www.sportingnews.com/archives/baseball/94794.html.)

Then, while the writhing pitcher ground the ball into his hip,
defiance flashed in Casey's eye, a sneer curled Casey's lip.

And now the leather-covered sphere came hurtling through the air,
and Casey stood a-watching it in haughty grandeur there.
Close by the sturdy batsman the ball unheeded sped --
"That ain't my style," said Casey. "Strike one!" the umpire said.

From the benches, black with people, there went up a muffled roar,
like the beating of the storm waves on a stern and distant shore.
"Kill him! Kill the umpire!" shouted someone on the stand,
and it's likely they'd have killed him had not Casey raised his hand.

With a smile of Christian charity, great Casey's visage shone,
he stilled the rising tumult, he bade the game go on.
He signaled to the pitcher, and once more the dun sphere flew,
but Casey still ignored it, and the umpire said, "Strike two!"

"Fraud!" cried the maddened thousands, and echo answered "Fraud!"
But one scornful look from Casey and the audience was awed.
They saw his face grow stern and cold, they saw his muscles strain,
and they knew that Casey wouldn't let that ball go by again.

The sneer has fled from Casey's lip, the teeth are clenched in hate.
He pounds, with cruel violence, his bat upon the plate.
And now the pitcher holds the ball, and now he lets it go,
and now the air is shattered by the force of Casey's blow.

Oh, somewhere in this favored land the sun is shining bright.
The band is playing somewhere, and somewhere hearts are light.
And, somewhere men are laughing, and little children shout,
but there is no joy in Mudville -- mighty Casey has struck out.

T T T T

It is not certain that Thayer was familiar with *Vitai Lampada* by Sir Henry Newbolt (1862-1938): although Newbolt's poem is more serious there is a certain resemblance.

There's a breathless hush in the Close to-night -
Ten to make and the match to win -
A bumping pitch and a blinding light,
An hour to play and the last man in.
And it's not for the sake of a ribboned coat,
Or the selfish hope of a season's fame,
But his Captain's hand on his shoulder smote
"Play up! play up! and play the game!"

The sand of the desert is sodden red, -
Red with the wreck of a square that broke; -
The Gatling's jammed and the colonel dead,
And the regiment blind with dust and smoke.
The river of death has brimmed his banks,

And England's far, and Honour a name,
But the voice of schoolboy rallies the ranks,
“Play up! play up! and play the game!”

This is the word that year by year
While in her place the School is set
Every one of her sons must hear,
And none that hears it dare forget.
This they all with a joyful mind
Bear through life like a torch in flame,
And falling fling to the host behind -
“Play up! play up! and play the game!”

T T T T

For my German readers I include two favourites. I would have loved to include something similar in French but have not yet found anything equivalent to the dramatic stressed metres of the English poems I have included. I suspect that the lack of tonic accent in French prohibits such versification except with very short words, as in the superb *Les Djinns* by Victor Hugo:

Murs, ville Et port, Asile De mort, Mer grise Où brise La brise Tout dort.	La rumeur approche, L'écho la redit. C'est comme la cloche D'un couvent maudit, Comme un bruit de foule Qui tonne et qui roule Et tantôt s'écroule Et tantôt grandit.
Dans la plaine Naît un bruit. C'est l'haleine De la nuit. Elle brame Comme une âme Qu'une flamme Toujours suit.	Dieu! La voix sépulcrale Des Djinns!... - Quel bruit ils font! Fuyons sous la spirale De l'escalier profond! Déjà s'éteint ma lampe, Et l'ombre de la rampe.. Qui le long du mur rampe, Monte jusqu'au plafond.
La voix plus haute Semble un grelot. D'un nain qui saute C'est le galop. Il fuit, s'élance, Puis en cadence Sur un pied danse Au bout d'un flot.	C'est l'essaim des Djinns qui passe, Et tourbillonne en sifflant. Les ifs, que leur vol fracasse, Craquent comme un pin brûlant. Leur troupeau lourd et rapide, Volant dans l'espace vide, Semble un nuage livide Qui porte un éclair au flanc. **.....**

Der Erlkoenig - *Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832) - English by Sir Walter Scott (1771-1832)*

Wer reitet so spät durch Nacht und Wind? Es ist der Vater mit seinem Kind; Er hat den Knaben wohl in dem Arm, Er fasst ihn sicher, er hält ihn warm.	O who rides by night thro' the woodland so wild? It is the fond father embracing his child; And close the boy nestles within his loved arm, To hold himself fast, and to keep himself warm.
Mein Sohn, was birgst du so bang dein Gesicht? Siehst Vater, du den Erlkönig nicht? Den Erlenkönig mit Kron und Schweif? - Mein Sohn, es ist ein Nebelstreif. -	“O father, see yonder! see yonder!” he says; “My boy, upon what dost thou fearfully gaze?” “O, 'tis the Erl-King with his crown and his shroud.” “No, my son, it is but a dark wreath of the cloud.”
“Du liebes Kind, komm, geh mit mir! Gar schöne Spiele spiel ich mit dir; Manch bunte Blumen sind an dem Strand, Meine Mutter hat manch gülden Gewand.”	“O come and go with me, thou loveliest child; By many a gay sport shall thy time be beguiled; My mother keeps for thee many a fair toy, And many a fine flower shall she pluck for my boy.”
Mein Vater, mein Vater, und hörest du nicht, Was Erlenkönig mir leise verspricht? - Sei ruhig, bleibe ruhig, mein Kind; In dürren Blättern säuselt der Wind. –	“O father, my father, and did you not hear The Erl-King whisper so low in my ear?” “Be still, my heart's darling--my child, be at ease; It was but the wild blast as it sung thro' the trees.”
“Willst, feiner Knabe, du mit mir gehn? Meine Töchter sollen dich warten schön; Meine Töchter führen den nächtlichen Reihn Und wiegen und tanzen und singen dich ein.”	“O wilt thou go with me, thou loveliest boy? My daughter shall tend thee with care and with joy; She shall bear thee so lightly thro' wet and thro' wild, And press thee, and kiss thee, and sing to my child.”
Mein Vater, mein Vater, und siehst du nicht dort Erlkönigs Töchter am düstern Ort? - Mein Sohn, mein Sohn, ich seh es genau: Es scheinen die alten Weiden so grau. -	“O father, my father, and saw you not plain The Erl-King's pale daughter glide past thro' the rain?” “Oh yes, my loved treasure, I knew it full soon; It was the grey willow that danced to the moon.”
“Ich liebe dich, mich reizt deine schöne Gestalt; Und bist du nicht willig, so brauch ich Gewalt.” Mein Vater, mein Vater, jetzt fasst er mich an! Erlkönig hat mir ein Leids getan! -	“O come and go with me, no longer delay, Or else, silly child, I will drag thee away.” “O father! O father! now, now, keep your hold, The Erl-King has seized me--his grasp is so cold!”
Dem Vater grauset's, er reitet geschwind, Er hält in den Armen das ächzende Kind, Erreicht den Hof mit Mühe und Not; In seinen Armen das Kind war tot.	Sore trembled the father; he spurr'd thro' the wild, Clasping close to his bosom his shuddering child; He reaches his dwelling in doubt and in dread, But, clasp'd to his bosom, the infant was dead.

Nis Randers - *Otto Ernst Schmidt (1862-1926)*
Krachen und Heulen und berstende Nacht,
Dunkel und Flammen in rasender Jagd
Ein Schrei durch die Brandung!

Und brennt der Himmel, so sieht man's gut:
Ein Wrack auf der Sandbank! Noch wiegt es die Flut;
Gleich holt sich's der Abgrund.

Nis Randers lugt - und ohne Hast
Spricht er: “Da hängt noch ein Mann im Mast;

Wir müssen ihn holen."

Da fasst ihn die Mutter: "Du steigst mit nicht ein:
Dich will ich behalten, du bliebst mir allein,
Ich will's, deine Mutter!

Dein Vater ging unter und Momme, mein Sohn;
Drei Jahre verschollen ist Uwe schon,
Mein Uwe, mein Uwe!"

Nis tritt auf die Brücke. Die Mutter ihm nach!
Er weist nach dem Wrack und spricht gemach:
"Und seine Mutter?"

Nun springt er ins Boot, und mit ihm noch sechs:
Hohes, hartes Friesengewächs;
Schon sausen die Ruder.

Boot oben, Boot unten, ein Höllentanz!
Nun muss es zerschmettern...! Nein: es blieb ganz!...
Wie lange? Wie lange?

Mit feurigen Geisseln peitscht das Meer
Die menschenfressenden Rosse daher;
Die schnauben und schäumen.

Die hechelnde Hast sie zusammenzwingt!
Eins auf den Nacken der anderen springt
Mit stampfenden Hufen!

Drei Wetter zusammen! Nun brennt die Welt!
Was da? - Ein Boot, das landwärts hält -
Sie sind es! Sie kommen!

Und Auge und Ohr ins Dunkel gespannt..
Still - ruft da nicht einer? - Er schreit´s durch die Hand:
"Sagt Mutter, 's Uwe!"

T T T T

In the hope that you enjoyed the first Jennings sample, here is another.

WARE, WYE, WATFORD

I never know whether to be surprised or not when I am told that foreigners find English extraordinarily difficult. On the one hand it is less rational, more 'given', than, say, French or Spanish, which have the air of being mental constructions; and it is more manifold, more European, than, say, German. On the other hand there is, surely, about most English words an ultimate rightness which ought to strike everyone, including foreigners, as the final perfection reached in man's art of naming. I don't mean the obvious, satisfying onomatopoeia of words such as *bang, dribble, snivel, splotch* (all my French dictionary can do for splotch is *grosse tache* - I ask you!); for there is a more subtle, allusive onomatopoeia in words which have nothing to do with actual sound: *sausage, elation, leaf, humdrum;* if boredom made an actual noise, that's what it *would* sound like; *hum, drum, hum, um.*

Our island is the home of a magical aptness, the ancient tussocky fields are the nearest approach, so far, to that ever-new Garden of Eden in which, as Mr W. H. Auden recently reminded us, Adam's first task was to give names to the Creatures. If anyone doubts this, let him consider the very names of our towns. For they not only describe places. They carry wonderful overtones, they seem to have been drawn from some huge, carelessly profuse stock of primal meaning, to have come out of the very bag from which Adam got his names. Let me illustrate with a few examples from this vast English treasury of subconscious meaning:

babbacombe n. An idle or nonsensical rumour. 'It's just a lot of b.'
barnstaple n. Mainstay, keystone. 'Mrs Thomas is the b. of our committee.'
bawtry adj. Used of windy and rainy cold weather. 'A b. day.'
beccles n. Ailment of sheep, cf., the Staggers, the Twitches, Quarter-ill, the Jumps.
bovey tracey adj. Headstrong wilful 'None of your b.t. ways here, Miss!'
brasted adj. -(colloq.). Term of humorous abuse. 'The b. thing's come unstuck.'
buckfastleigh adv. (arch. and poet.). Manfully. '*Aye, and right buckfastleigh, lad*' (Hardy).
cromer n. A mistake, bungle. 'You made a c. there.'
dunstable adj. (arch.). Possible. '*If 'tis dunstable he'll do't, my lord*' (Shak.).
dungeness n. Uninterestingness. 'A suburb of extraordinary d.'
erith v. (obsol.). Only in third pers., in old proverb 'Man erith, woman morpeth.'
glossop n. Dolt, clot. 'Put it down, you silly g.'
holyhead n. Hangover.
ilkley adj. Having large elbows.
kenilworth n. A trifling or beggarly amount. 'He left her nobbut a kenilworth in his will.'
kettering adj. from v. **ketter** (obsol.). Like the flight of a butterfly.
leek adj. Very cold.
lostwithiel n. Ne'er-do-well.
lowestoft n. A subterranean granary.
lydd adj. Useless, defunct, inactive.
maesteg adv. (Welsh). Musical direction to Welsh choirs to sing *maestoso* but at the same time brightly.
manningtree n. A gallows.
midhurst n. Maturity, fruition. 'His career was in its m.'
morpeth see **erith**.
pershore adv. (arch.). Certainly, for sure. '*Pershore thou'rt damn'd*' (Webster).
priddy adj. Neat.
rickmansworth n. (legal). Ancient nominal rent paid to lord of manor for hay. Always paired, in mortgage document, with –
stevenage n. (legal). Ancient nominal rent paid to lord of manor for stones.
thirsk n. A desire for vodka.
uttoxeter n. A charlatan, usually a quack doctor.
wembley adj. Suffering from a vague *malaise.* 'I feel a bit w. this morning.'
woking pres. part. of v. to woke (obsol.). Day-dreaming.

T T T T

In February 2005 a little known *grande dame* of English letters died. Her employer, *The New Yorke*r, paid a fitting tribute to her achievement in setting the high standard of English of that exceptionally literate magazine.

Six decades ago, not long after being hired by Harold Ross as a copy editor at *The New Yorker*, a shy young woman, an Oberlin graduate, set to work on a manuscript by James Thurber and soon came across the word "raunchy." She had never heard of the word and thought it was a mistake. "Raunchy" became "paunchy." Thurber's displeasure was such that the young woman barely escaped firing. Later, according to his biographer Harrison Kinney, Thurber wrote that "facetiously" was the only word in English that had all six vowels in order. What about "abstemiously"? the copy editor replied. Thurber, who was not easily impressed, was finally compelled to ask, "Who is Eleanor Gould?"

Miss Gould, as she was known to everyone at the magazine, died last week, at the age of eighty-seven. She worked here for fifty-four years, most of them as its Grammarian (a title invented for her), and she earned the affection and gratitude of generations of writers. She shaped the language of the magazine, always striving for a kind of Euclidean clarity - transparent, precise, muscular. It was an ideal that seemed to have not only syntactical but moral dimensions.

Her devotion to what she called her "reading" was as intense as any writer's to his writing. She never missed a day of work. Fifteen years ago, when she was seventy-two, she discovered, during a conversation with a colleague, that she had gone completely deaf. She came to the office anyway, riding the bus down Central Park West as she always did. Thereafter, writers and other editors wrote notes to her on scraps of paper. She answered in a birdlike voice, high and a little scratchy, like a gull's.

Miss Gould occupied various offices over the years, including one that Thurber had decorated by drawing on the walls. Her bookshelf held a row of favorite authorities, including a Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, Fowler's Modern English Usage, and Theodore Bernstein's "Miss Thistlebottom's Hobgoblins," and on a dictionary stand was Webster's Second Unabridged. Wearing thick glasses and an ever-changing array of bright-colored pants and sweaters, she spent the day, and many nights, hovering over her stack of galley and page proofs. Her attention seemed never to waver. She did not daydream. You were unlikely to pass her office and catch her staring off into the canyons of midtown.

A typical "Gould proof" was filled with the lightly pencilled tracery of her objections, suggestions, and abbreviated queries: "emph?" "ind.," "mean this?" She confronted the galley proofs of writers as various as Joseph Mitchell, J. D. Salinger, Janet Flanner--well, everyone, really. She did a proof on every nonfiction piece published in the magazine. Even a writer as determinedly vernacular as Pauline Kael, who initially found Miss Gould's suggestions intrusive, came to accept them—*many* of them, anyway—with gratitude. Her reading was detached, objective, scientific, as if she somehow believed that a kind of perfection in prose was possible. Like Bobby Fischer's sense of the chessboard, her feel for English was at a higher level than the rest of us - we editors and writers -could hope to glimpse.

"My list of pet language peeves," she once told *The Key Reporter*, the Phi Beta Kappa newsletter, "would certainly include writers' use of indirection (i.e., slipping new information into a narrative as if the reader already knew it); confusion between restrictive and non-restrictive phrases and clauses ('that' goes with restrictive clauses, and, ordinarily, 'which' with non-restrictive); careless repetition; and singular subjects with plural verbs and vice versa." She was a fiend for problems of sequence and logic. In her presence, modifiers dared not dangle. She could find a solecism in a Stop sign.

Once in a great while, Miss Gould would lose her editorial patience - "No grammar! No sense!" was one exclamation of distress; "Have we completely lost our mind?" she once wrote in the margins of a Talk of the Town galley when the section still used the editorial "we" - but she did not take offense when her suggestions were overruled by another editor or the writer. Miss Gould once found what she believed were four grammatical errors in a three-word sentence. And yet the sentence, by Lawrence Weschler (and, alas, no longer remembered), was published as written.

In some cases, Miss Gould's suggestions took the ideal of clarity to Monty Python-like extremes. For example, some years ago, she saw the phrase ". . . and now sat stone still, chewing gum throughout the proceedings" and suggested replacing the last bit with "sat stone still except for his jaw, which chewed gum." Funny, yes, but the correction planted a red flag. Something was wrong, and needed fixing. Her attentions, imperceptible to the reader, made all the difference. Her effect on a piece of writing could be like that of a master tailor on a suit; what had once seemed slovenly and overwrought was suddenly trig and handsome. The wearer stood taller in his shoes.

Especially in the early years of the magazine, there were many office romances and marriages, and, in 1946, Miss Gould married the head of the fact-checking department, Freddie Packard. The two worked for the magazine for a combined ninety-nine years. (Mr. Packard died in 1974.) They had a daughter, Susan, with whom Miss Gould travelled to remote destinations. In her late seventies, after reading Apsley Cherry-Garrard's "The Worst Journey in the World," Eleanor set off with Susan for the Antarctic.

Miss Gould used to tell her friends at the magazine that she wanted to work until she was a hundred. A stroke, which she suffered at her desk, in 1999, forced her to retire. The title of Grammarian was retired with her. In subsequent years, friends at the magazine would visit or send gifts: books, flowers, a basket of cheeses and fruit. But after a while she found such attentions hard to bear. She missed the work that she could no longer do. To one correspondent she sent a beautiful letter, frank and kind, needlessly grateful, which ended with the sentence "Please forget about me." Of course, we never could and we never will. — *David Remnick*

T T T T

In talking of style, it is an unfortunate fact that the needs of narrative do not always make for good poetry. Highly accented metre can become monotonous.

- dada **dà** dada **dà** dada **dà** dada **dà** ("And his cohorts were gleaming in purple and gold")
- da **dà** da **dà** da **dà** da **dà** ("The river Weser, deep and wide")
- **dà** dada **dà** dada ("Half a league, half a league")
- da **dà** da **dà** da **dà** – ("Old Kaspar's work was done")
- da **dà**da da **dà**da da **dà**da da **dà** - ("I galloped, Dirck galloped, we galloped all three")
- **dà** da **dà**da dada **dà** dada **dà** - ("White founts falling in the courts of the sun")
- da da **dà** da dada **dà**da ("By the shore of Gitche Gumee")

The length of the poems and the primary objective of telling a story make it difficult for the author to maintain a high poetic quality in the writing and, if the content is dull, narrative verse can get perilously close to doggerel. I conclude this edition of *Christmas Pudding* with some egregious examples of bad poetry in the hope that the reader will appreciate all the more the quality of those better poems I have selected!

Three hundred years ago, the authors of bad poetry were subjected to merciless satire.

From **MacFlecknoe** - *John Dryden (1631-1700)*
Some beams of wit on other souls may fall,
Strike through, and make a lucid interval;
But Shadwell's genuine night admits no ray;
His rising fogs prevail upon the day.
Besides, his goodly fabric fills the eye,
And seems designed for thoughtless majesty;
Thoughtless as monarch oaks that shade the plain,
And, spread in solemn state, supinely reign.
Heywood and Shirley were but types of thee,
Thou last great prophet of tautology.

From **The Dunciad** - *Alexander Pope (1688-1744)*
Wit shoots in vain its momentary fires,
The meteor drops, and in a flash expires. **…..**
Nor *public* Flame, nor *private*, dares to shine;
Nor *human* Spark is left, nor Glimpse *divine* !
Lo! thy dread Empire, Chaos! is restored;
Light dies before thy uncreating word:
Thy hand, great Anarch! lets the curtain fall;
And universal Darkness buries All.

Samuel Johnson (1709–1784) even wrote a verse to illustrate the genre.[12]

As with my hat upon my head
I walked along the Strand,
I there did meet another man
With his hat in his hand.

In less critical times, much awful poetry has been allowed to pass without censure. George Orwell usefully identified a plentiful sub-category of "good bad poetry … all of it, I should say, subsequent to 1790" that was "capable of giving true pleasure to people who can see clearly what is wrong with [it]". I submit the following examples of bad poems. As Orwell might have said, some are more egregious than others.

From **Simon Lee** - *William Wordsworth (1770-1850)*
In the sweet shire of Cardigan,
Not far from pleasant Ivor-hall,
An old man dwells, a little man,
I've heard he once was tall.
Of years he has upon his back,
No doubt, a burthen weighty;
He says he is three score and ten,
But others say he's eighty.
A long blue livery-coat has he,
That's fair behind, and fair before;
Yet, meet him where you will, you see
At once that he is poor.
Full five and twenty years he lived
A running huntsman merry;
And, though he has but one eye left,
His cheek is like a cherry.
[*and so on for another eleven verses – Samuel Johnson couldn't have done better*][13]

From **Don Juan (Canto IV)** - *George Gordon Lord Byron (1788-1824)*[14]
Here I must leave him, for I grow pathetic,
Moved by the Chinese nymph of tears, green tea!
Than whom Cassandra was not more prophetic;
For if my pure libations exceed three,
I feel my heart become so sympathetic,
That I must have recourse to black Bohee[15]:
'Tis pity wine should be so deleterious,
For tea and coffee leave us much more serious.

To Flush, My Dog - *Elizabeth Barrett Browning (1806-61)*
Yet, my pretty sportive friend,
Little is't to such an end
That I praise thy rareness!
Other dogs may be thy peers
Haply in these drooping ears,
And this glossy fairness.

But of thee it shall be said,
This dog watched beside a bed
Day and night unweary -
Watched within a curtained room,
Where no sunbeam brake the gloom
Round the sick and dreary.

Roses, gathered for a vase,
In that chamber died apace,
Beam and breeze resigning.
This dog only, waited on,
Knowing that when light is gone
Love remains for shining. [*And so on, for another four verses*]

[12] For further research on the subject, see http://homepages.wmich.edu/~cooneys/poems/bad and *The Stuffed Owl*, an anthology of bad verse compiled in 1930 Wyndham Lewis and Charles Lee, current edition by New York Review of Books Press, 2003.

[13] In fairness to Wordsworth, the poems he and Coleridge included in *Lyrical Ballads* were to be considered "as experiments": "They were written chiefly with a view to ascertain how far the language of conversation in the middle and lower classes of society is adapted to the purposes of poetic pleasure." Their attack on "poetic diction", however worthy, actually produced much verse of which the chief characteristic was not "naturalness" but bathos.

[14] Byron and Elizabeth Barrett Browing actually know how to write, but, as Horace said, "even Homer nods" (see *Christmas Pudding 2004*, p. 28). With Stevie Smith I am not so sure. With Whitman I am.

[15] A black tea from China, popular in the 18th and 19th centuries.

Casabianca - *Felicia Dorothea Hemans (1793-1835)*
The boy stood on the burning deck,
Whence all but him had fled;
The flame that lit the battle's wreck
Shone round him o'er the dead.

Yet beautiful and bright he stood,
As born to rule the storm;
A creature of heroic blood,
A proud though childlike form.

The flames rolled on; he would not go
Without his father's word;
That father, faint in death below,
His voice no longer heard. **…...**

Then came a burst of thunder sound;
The boy, - Oh! Where was he?
Ask of the winds, that far around
With fragments strewed the sea, -

With shroud and mast and pennon fair,
That well had home their part, -
But the noblest thing that perished there
Was that young, faithful heart.

Oh Captain! My Captain! - *Walt Whitman (1819-1892)*
O Captain! my Captain! our fearful trip is done,
The ship has weathered every rack, the prize we sought is won,
The port is near, the bells I hear, the people all exulting,
While follow eyes the steady keel, the vessel grim and daring;
But O heart! heart! heart!
O the bleeding drops of red,
Where on the deck my Captain lies,
Fallen cold and dead. **…..**

My Captain does not answer, his lips are pale and still,
My father does not feel my arm, he has no pulse nor will,
The ship is anchored safe and sound, its voyage closed and done,
From fearful trip the victor ship comes in with object won;
Exult O shores, and ring O bells!
But I with mournful tread,
Walk the deck my Captain lies,
Fallen cold and dead.

From **The Author's Early Life** - *Julia Moore (1847-1920)*
My childhood days have passed and gone,
And it fills my heart with pain
To think that youth will nevermore
Return to me again.

And now kind friends, what I have wrote,
I hope you will pass o'er,
And not criticize, as some have done,
Hitherto herebefore.

From **Beautiful Springs** - *J. B. Smiley (19th century)*
The north winds are still and the blizzards at rest,
All in the beautiful spring.
The dear little robins are building their nests,
All in the beautiful spring.
The tramp appears and for lodging begs,
The old hen setteth on turkey eggs,
And the horse has scratches in all four legs,
All in the beautiful spring.

The Murderer - *Stevie Smith (1902-71)*
My true love breathed her latest breath
And I have closed her eyes in death.
It was a cold and windy day
In March, when my love went away.
She was not like other girls---rather diffident,
And that is how we had an accident.

Galathea - *Frank Wedekind (1864-1918)*
Ach, wie brenn' ich vor Verlangen, Galathea, schönes Kind,
Dir zu küssen deine Wangen, weil sie so entzückend sind.
Wonne die mir widerfahre, Galathea, schönes Kind,
Dir zu küssen deine Haare, weil sie so verlockend sind.

Nimmer wehr mir, bis ich ende, Galathea, schönes Kind,
Dir zu küssen deine Hände, weil sie so verlockend sind.
Ach, du ahnst nicht, wie ich glühe, Galathea, schönes Kind,
Dir zu küssen deine Knie, weil sie so verlockend sind.

Und was tät ich nicht, du süsse Galathea, schönes Kind,
Dir zu küssen deine Füsse, weil sie so verlockend sind.
Aber deinen Mund enthülle, Mädchen, meinen Küssen nie,
Denn in seiner Reize Fülle küsst ihn nur die Phantasie.

The Tay Bridge Disaster - *William McGonagall (1825-1902)* [16]
Beautiful Railway Bridge of the Silv'ry Tay!
Alas! I am very sorry to say
That ninety lives have been taken away
On the last Sabbath day of 1879,

[16] I hope readers find, like me, that McGonagall is so dreadful that he is actually funny. Otherwise I have no excuse for including this poem in full. His best lines are probably

On yonder hill there stands a coo,
If it's no there, it's awa noo.

Which will be remembered for a very long time.

'Twas about seven o'clock at night,
And the wind it blew with all its might,
And the rain came pouring down,
And the dark clouds seemed to frown,
And the Demon of the air seemed to say-
"I'll blow down the Bridge of Tay."

When the train left Edinburgh
The passengers' hearts were light and felt no sorrow,
But Boreas blew a terrific gale,
Which made their hearts for to quail,
And many of the passengers with fear did say-
"I hope God will send us safe across the Bridge of Tay."

But when the train came near to Wormit Bay,
Boreas he did loud and angry bray,
And shook the central girders of the Bridge of Tay
On the last Sabbath day of 1879,
Which will be remembered for a very long time.

So the train sped on with all its might,
And Bonnie Dundee soon hove in sight,
And the passengers' hearts felt light,
Thinking they would enjoy themselves on the New Year,
With their friends at home they loved most dear,
And wish them all a happy New Year.

So the train moved slowly along the Bridge of Tay,
Until it was about midway,
Then the central girders with a crash gave way,
And down went the train and passengers into the Tay!
The Storm Fiend did loudly bray,
Because ninety lives had been taken away,
On the last Sabbath day of 1879,
Which will be remembered for a very long time.

As soon as the catastrophe came to be known
The alarm from mouth to mouth was blown,
And the cry rang out all o'er the town,
Good Heavens! the Tay Bridge is blown down,
And a passenger train from Edinburgh,
Which filled all the peoples hearts with sorrow,
And made them for to turn pale,
Because none of the passengers were saved to tell the tale
How the disaster happened on the last Sabbath day of 1879,
Which will be remembered for a very long time.

It must have been an awful sight,
To witness in the dusky moonlight,
While the Storm Fiend did laugh, and angry did bray,
Along the Railway Bridge of the Silv'ry Tay,
Oh! ill-fated Bridge of the Silv'ry Tay,
I must now conclude my lay
By telling the world fearlessly without the least dismay,
That your central girders would not have given way,
At least many sensible men do say,
Had they been supported on each side with buttresses,
At least many sensible men confesses,
For the stronger we our houses do build,
The less chance we have of being killed.

Curiously, the accident on the Bridge of Tay also caught the imagination of the German poet, Theodor Fontane (1819-1898). His poem (*Die Brücke am Tay*) is somewhat better than McGonagall's.

..... Auf der Norderseite, das Brückenhaus -
Alle Fenster sehen nach Süden aus,
Und die Brücknersleut' ohne Rast und Ruh
Und in Bangen sehen nach Süden zu;
Denn wütender wurde der Winde Spiel,
Und jetzt, als ob Feuer vom Himmel fiel',
Erglüht es in niederschiessender Pracht
Überm Wasser unten ... Und wieder ist Nacht.

"Wann treffen wir drei wieder zusamm'?"
"Um Mitternacht, am Bergeskamm."
"Auf dem hohen Moor, am Erlenstamm." "Ich komme."
"Ich mit."
"Ich nenn euch die Zahl." "Und ich die Namen."
"Und ich die Qual." "Hei!
Wie Splitter brach das Gebälk entzwei."
"Tand, Tand,
Ist das Gebilde von Menschenhand."[17]

14 Variations on 14 Words - *Edwin Morgan (1965)*
"I have nothing to say
and I am saying it
and that is poetry" - John Cage
I have to say poetry and is that nothing and am I saying it
I am and I have poetry to say and is that nothing saying it
I am nothing and I have poetry to say and that is saying it
I that am saying poetry have nothing and it is I and to say
And I say that I am to have poetry and saying it is nothing
I am poetry and nothing and saying it is to say that I have
To have nothing is poetry and I am saying that and I say it
Poetry is saying I have nothing and I am to say that and it
Saying nothing I am poetry and I have to say that and it is

[17] This is a translation of the first lines of the famous witches' scene from Shakespeare's *Macbeth*.

It is and I am and I have poetry saying say that to nothing
It is saying poetry to nothing and I say I have and am that
And that nothing is poetry I am saying and I have to say it
Saying poetry is nothing and to that I say I am and have it

"All bad poetry springs from genuine feeling," wrote Oscar Wilde. However, ENOUGH IS ENOUGH!

T T T T

If you don't live in Sydney (and don't read the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*) you may have missed the correspondence in the *Sydney Morning Herald* over much of 2004 and 2005 about water conservation. It started with new government restrictions on the use of drinking water and took on a life of its own when a Tony Watson wrote to the *Herald* suggesting that "As my personal commitment to saving water during the restrictions, I am prepared to take my showers with my wife until further notice."

His suggestion launched a flood of letters to the editor: Australians agree it contributed much needed humour at a time when the papers were full of bad news from Iraq and elsewhere. Some proclaimed that in the interests of conservation they too would be willing to shower with Mrs Watson, some thought that they could save as much water by drinking their whisky straight in future and others suggested that combining the two methods would be the best solution. There the matter rested until Tony Watson sent another letter to the paper announcing that as a result of his conservation measures, Mrs. Watson was pregnant. On 17 May he wrote again announcing "It's a girl. Miranda was born early on Saturday morning and mother and daughter are doing well. We have both found the continued interest in Lisa's confinement somewhat surreal, but are also flattered and humbled by the fact that, for whatever reason, the story has clearly had such an effect on the Herald's readers. We still encounter friends and colleagues who comment on it and ask if it is us to whom the letters refer. Thanks to everyone for their interest."

Now Australians will have to find another source of humour.

T T T T

Todd Stewart made the following contributions from Sun Valley in Idaho.

"Your essay on punctuation reminded me of a lesson we were taught in my entering Foreign Service class: not to omit the verb 'to be' when writing a cable. To illustrate the confusion such an omission might cause, our instructor told us of a writer who was doing a story on Cary Grant. Encountering some discrepancy regarding the actor's date of birth, he cabled to Grant's agent, 'How old Cary Grant?' The agent cabled back, 'Old Cary Grant fine. How you?'

Kipling aimed *The White Man's Burden* at American public opinion when the Senate was considering ratification of the treaty ending the Spanish-American War, which provided, inter alia, for annexation of the Philippines. The treaty was ratified, but the Filipinos responded with a bloody insurgency eventually involving some 70,000 American troops. Disenchanted with imperialism, the *New York World* responded to Kipling in 1899:

We've taken up the white man's burden
Of ebony and brown;
Now will you kindly tell us, Rudyard,
How we may put it down."

T T T T

Re Quotations

Thanks to Biba Pesut for adding to my Shakespeare quotations: "Hell is empty, And all the devils are here." *The Tempest I, ii*

A letter (from Regina Bringolf, New Hampshire) to *The New York Review of Books* of 14 July 2005 deplores the generalised misapplication of the phrase *mens sana in corpore sano.* "Juvenal mocks the foolishness of most prayers and wishes addressed to the Gods and exhorts his readers that the only thing one should pray for is a sound mind in (or and) a healthy body. *Orandum est ut sit mens sana in corpere sano.* He never implied that a sound mind can only be found in a healthy body."

T T T T

Many years ago, my mother sent me the following poem (author unknown). If the third verse sounds familiar to you (as it does to me) it may be time to send it to <u>your</u> children.

Just a line to say I'm living ...
That I'm not among the dead,
Though I'm getting more forgetful
And mixed up in the head.

I got used to my arthritis,
To my dentures I'm resigned,
I can manage my bifocals,
But Lord ... how I miss my mind!!!

Sometimes I can't remember
When I stand at the foot of the stairs,
If I must go up for something ...
Or if I've just come down from there.

I stand before the fridge at times,
My poor mind filled with doubt,
Have I come to put food away,
Or come to take some out?

There are times when it is dark out,
And with my nightcap on my head,
I don't know if I'm retiring ...
Or just getting out of bed.

So if it's my turn to write you,
There's no need for getting sore,
I may think that I have written
And don't want to be a bore.

I do know that I miss you
And wish that you were near.
And now it's nearly mail time
So I must say good bye, my dear.

Now I'm standing beside the mail box
With a face so very red,
Instead of mailing you my letter ...
I have opened it instead!!!