

CHRISTMAS PUDDING

2001



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 and acknowledges Norwich's superior recipe.

What lucubrations can be more upon it?
Fourteen good measur'd verses make a sonnet.
Robert Burns 1759-96, A Sonnet upon Sonnets

Let foreign nations of their language boast,
What fine variety each tongue affords:
I like our language, as our men and coast;
Who cannot dress it well, want wit, not words.
George Herbert 1593-1633, from the sonnet "The Son"

Many thanks to Dennis Thompson for pointing out that “all good Anglicans will of course already have enlisted the Almighty in the cooking (of *Christmas Pudding*), for the Collect to the last Sunday before Advent reads: ‘Stir up, we beseech thee, O Lord, the wills of thy faithful people; that they, plenteously bringing forth the fruit of good works, may of thee be plenteously rewarded; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen’ ”.

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On 22 July 2001, an old soldier died. There are probably not many to whom the name Bertie Felstead means anything today. His portrait (opposite, above) shows a very normal young man, rather proud to be in his new uniform, the hint of a cheeky grin as he tries to appear serious – he was one of the lucky ones, like my grandfather (opposite, below), who survived the First World War. The remarkable thing about Bertie is that he was the last living witness of an unusual and symbolic event at an earlier period of crisis in world affairs – a game of football.

In 1914, Bertie was a private in the Royal Welch Fusiliers, stationed in the trenches near the village of Laventie in Northern France – on Christmas Eve, soldiers from enemy lines sang, in German, the Welsh hymn *Ar Hyd y Nos*, which was taken as a recognition of the nationality of the regiment in the opposing trenches. In an interview a few years before his death, Bertie recalled: “we were only 100 yards or so apart when Christmas morning came. A German began singing *All Through The Night*, then more voices joined in and the British troops responded with *Good King Wenceslas*... You couldn't hear each other sing like that without it affecting your feelings for the other side. The next morning, all the soldiers were shouting to one another, ‘Hello Tommy, Hello Fritz’ ... The Germans started it, coming out of their trenches and walking over to us. Nobody decided for us - we just climbed over our parapet and went over to them, we thought nobody would shoot at us if we all mingled together... We weren't afraid. ... It wasn't a game as such, more a kick-around and a free-for-all. There could have been 50 on each side for all I know. I played because I really liked football. I don't know how long it lasted, probably half an hour.”

He remembered how “German” they looked with their strange spiked helmets. “They could speak only a few words of English, but the word passed around that we agreed we would not fight that day,” he said. “We met, swapped fags, and had a good smoke together. We exchanged greetings, and shook hands. Of course, we realized we were in the most extraordinary position, wishing each other Happy Christmas - and shooting each other the next day. But the truce did not last long.” Later, according to another survivor: “a major appeared, yelling, ‘You came out to fight the Huns, not to make friends with them!’. So our lads reluctantly returned to the trenches, followed by a salvo from our artillery which ended the episode”. Bertie concluded: “There wouldn't have been a war if it had been left to the public. We didn't want to fight but we thought we were defending England.”

There is something very moving in this event: German and British infantry playing football together for a few hours before they start shooting at one another again – a moment of sanity in a world of insanity, a moment of humanity in a world moving mechanically towards mutual destruction. My grandfather had been in this war – fighting against the nation from which his wife's parents had come to England from Brunswick in

1870, where she had been to school and where she still had relatives. Her parents, in turn, were treated as enemy aliens in 1914, despite having been in England for more than forty years. In today's crisis in Central Asia, pray that wise counsel may prevail – and look for Christmas inspiration in this story of one of the most extraordinary games of football ever played¹.

The poetic inspiration for this year's *Christmas Pudding* is the sonnet, which I consider the finest and most perfect (as well as the most challenging) form of English poetry: it has stimulated most of the major poets – and a number of minor ones as well – to some of their greatest poetry.

The sonnet is a lyric poem of fourteen lines, following a set rhyme-scheme; it developed in Italy probably in the thirteenth century. Petrarch, in the fourteenth century, is recognised as having raised the sonnet to its greatest Italian perfection.

Sir Thomas Wyatt (1503-42) and Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey, (1517-47) introduced the sonnet form to England and made the first translations of Petrarchan sonnets into English (see below). While most of English poetry is characterised by strong-stress and syllable-stress metres, the metres of French, Italian and Spanish poetry are normally determined by syllable count (e.g. in French poetry, the alexandrine, or 12-syllabled line). Stress and pause in these lines are variable; the count of syllables is fixed. The English poets adapted the Petrarchan sonnet to the rhythms of English and gave it a new form – frequently known as the “Shakespearean” sonnet.

The Petrarchan sonnet is divided into two parts of eight and six lines respectively. The English, or Shakespearean sonnet most frequently embodies four divisions: three quatrains (each with a rhyme-scheme of its own) and a rhymed couplet. The couplet at the end is usually a commentary on the foregoing, an epigrammatic close. The line normally contains five accented syllables (known as an iambic pentameter).

The brevity of the sonnet, its fixed rhythmic and rhyme schemes and the convention that, in the Shakespearean form, the last two lines should make an epigrammatic statement call for all the technical skill at the poet's command; the regular rhyme pattern is pleasing to the ear and the limitation of fourteen lines encourages precision of meaning and perfection of expression².

Wordsworth, who would not be my first choice of teamleader in a debate on English

¹ See page 11 for the text of *All Through The Night* / *Ar Hyd y Nos* and pages 20-21 for a selection of the work of poets who fought in the Great War.

² For a selection of English sonnets, see <http://members.aol.com/ericblomqu/alpha.htm>

poetry³, was, however, aware that the sonnet is easily underestimated:

Scorn not the Sonnet: Critic, you have frowned
Mindless of its just honours.

Nuns fret not at their convents' narrow room,
And hermits are contented with their cells,
... In truth the prison unto which we doom
Ourselves, no prison is: and hence to me,
In sundry moods, 'twas pastime to be bound
Within the sonnet's scanty plot of ground,
Pleased if some souls (for such there needs must be)
Who have felt the weight of too much liberty,
Should find brief solace there, as I have found.

Milton, too, would not be in my A team, yet his sonnet “On his Blindness” is arguably the finest thing he wrote⁴:

When I consider how my light is spent,
Ere half my days, in this dark world and wide,
And that one talent which is death to hide,
Lodged with me useless, though my soul more bent
To serve therewith my maker, and present
My true account, lest He returning chide,
'Doth God exact day-labour, light denied?'
I fondly ask; but patience to prevent
That murmur, soon replies, 'God doth not need

³ Wordsworth, by his choice of maudlin “natural” settings and vapid language, established conventions for the subject matter and poetic diction of “Romantic” verse which stultified English poetry until the beginning of the 20th century. The following sonnet by James Kenneth Stephen (1859-1892) is a fair summation:

Two voices are there: one is of the deep;
It learns the storm-cloud's thunderous melody,
Now roars, now murmurs with the changing sea,
Now bird-like pipes, now closes soft in sleep:
And one is of an old half-witted sheep
Which bleats articulate monotony,
And indicates that two and one are three,
That grass is green, lakes damp, and mountains steep:
And, Wordsworth, both are thine: at certain times
Forth from the heart of thy melodious rhymes,
The form and pressure of high thoughts will burst:
At other times -- good Lord! I'd rather be
Quite unacquainted with the A.B.C.
Than write such hopeless rubbish as thy worst.

⁴ Milton, by the use of pompous language and tortured word order in *Paradise Lost*, did a disservice to English prosody. His declamatory style also reinforced an unhappy poetic convention. I am always suspicious of poems beginning with the exclamation “O”, especially if there is an exclamation mark involved somewhere: the sought-for mood of rapture almost always rings hollow. Which reminds me of my favourite Brezhnev joke: In 1980, Brezhnev opened the Moscow Olympic Games. He began reading the speech handed to him by one of his aides: “Oh, Oh! Oh! Oh Oh!” “Comrade Brezhnev,” said the aide, “that’s the Olympic symbol – the speech starts further down”.

Either man's work or his own gifts, who best
Bear His mild yoke, they serve Him best: His state
Is kingly; thousands at His bidding speed
And post o'er land and ocean without rest;
They also serve who only stand and wait.'

| | |
|---|---|
| <p>Petrarch, Sonnet CXL</p> <p>Amor, che nel penser mio vive e regna E 'l suo seggio maggior nel mio cor tene, Talor armato ne la fronte vene, Ivi si loca, et ivi pon sua insegna. Quella ch'amare e sofferir ne 'nsegna E vòl che 'l gran desio, l'accesa spene, Ragion, vergogna e reverenza affrene, Di nostro ardir fra se stessa si sdegna. Onde Amor paventoso fugge al core, Lasciando ogni sua impresa, e piange, e trema; Ivi s'asconde, e non appar più fòre. Che poss'io far, temendo il mio signore, Se non star seco in fin a l'ora estrema? Ché bel fin fa chi ben amando more.</p> | <p><i>Sir Thomas Wyatt</i></p> <p>The long love that in my heart doth harbor And in mine heart doth keep his residence, Into my face presseth with bold pretense, And there campeth, displaying his banner. She that me learneth to love and to suffer, And wills that my trust and lust's negligence Be reined by reason, shame, and reverence, With his hardiness taketh displeasure. Wherewith love to the heart's forest he fleeth, Leaving his enterprise with pain and cry, And there him hideth and not appeareth. What may I do when my master feareth But in the field with him to live and die? For good is the life ending faithfully.</p> |
| <p>Petrarch Sonnet CXLV</p> <p>Pommi ove 'l sol occide i fiori e l'erba o dove vince lui il ghiaccio e la neve, pommi ov'è il carro suo temprato e leve et ov'è chi cel rende o chi cel serba; pommi in umil fortuna od in superba, al dolce aere sereno, al fosco e greve; pommi a la notte, al di lungo ed al breve, a la matura etate od a l'acerba; pommi in cielo od in terra od in abisso, in alto poggio, in valle ima e palustre, libero spirito od a' suoi membri affisso; pommi con fama oscura o con illustre: sarò qual fui, vivrò com'io son visso, continüando il mio sospir trillustre.</p> | <p><i>Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey</i></p> <p>Set me whereas the sun doth parch the green, Or where his beams may not dissolve the ice, In temperate heat, where he is felt and seen; With proud people, in presence sad and wise, Set me in base, or yet in high degree; In the long night, or in the shortest day; In clear weather, or where mists thickest be; In lusty youth, or when my hairs be gray; Set me in earth, in heaven, or yet in hell; In hill, in dale, or in the foaming flood; Thrall, or at large,--alive whereso I dwell; Sick or in health, in ill fame or in good; Yours I will be, and with that only thought Comfort myself when that my hap is naught.</p> |

Loving in truth, and fain in verse my love to show,
That She, dear She, might take some pleasure of my pain,
- Pleasure might cause her read, reading might make her know,
Knowledge might pity win, and pity grace obtain -
I sought fit words to paint the blackest face of woe,
Studying inventions fine, her wits to entertain,
Oft turning others' leaves, to see if thence would flow
Some fresh and fruitful showers upon my sunburnt brain.
But words came halting forth, wanting Invention's stay;
Invention, Nature's child, fled step-dame Study's blows;
And others' feet still seemed but strangers in my way.
Thus, great with child to speak, and helpless in my throes,

Biting my truant pen, beating myself for spite -
"Fool!" said my Muse to me "look in thy heart, and write!"
Sir Philip Sidney 1554-1586⁵

Beauty, sweet love, is like the morning dew,
Whose short refresh upon the tender green
Cheers for a time, but till the sun doth shew,
And straight 'tis gone as it had never been.
Soon doth it fade that makes the fairest flourish,
Short is the glory of the blushing rose;
The hue which thou so carefully dost nourish,
Yet which at length thou must be forced to lose,
When thou, surcharged with the burthen of thy years,
Shalt bend thy wrinkles homeward to the earth,
And that in beauty's lease expired appears
The date of age, the kalends of our death.
But ah! no more, this must not be foretold,
For women grieve to think they must be old.
Samuel Daniel ?1562-1619

Let me not to the marriage of true minds
Admit impediments. Love is not love
Which alters when it alteration finds,
Or bends with the remover to remove:
O no! it is an ever-fixed mark
That looks on tempests and is never shaken;
It is the star to every wandering bark,
Whose worth's unknown, although his height be taken.
Love's not Time's fool, though rosy lips and cheeks
Within his bending sickle's compass come:
Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,
But bears it out even to the edge of doom.
If this be error and upon me proved,
I never writ, nor no man ever loved.
William Shakespeare 1564-1646, Sonnet CXVI

Since there's no help, come let us kiss and part.
Nay, I have done, you get no more of me.
And I am glad, yea glad with all my heart
That thus so cleanly I myself can free.
Shake hands forever, cancel all our vows,
And when we meet at any time again,
Be it not seen in either of our brows
That we one jot of former love retain.
Now at the last gasp of Love's latest breath,
When, his pulse failing, Passion speechless lies,
When Faith is kneeling by his bed of death,
And Innocence is closing up his eyes –

⁵ This sonnet is an unusual example of iambic *hexameter*.

Now, if thou wouldst, when all have given him over,
From death to life thou mightst him yet recover.
Michael Drayton 1563-1631

Batter my heart, three-person'd God; for you
As yet but knock, breathe, shine, and seek to mend;
That I may rise, and stand, o'erthrow me and bend
Your force, to break, blow, burn and make me new.
I, like an usurpt town, to another due,
Labour to admit you, but Oh, to no end,
Reason your viceroy in me, me should defend,
But is captiv'd, and proves weak or untrue.
Yet dearly I love you, and would be loved fain,
But am betroth'd unto your enemy:
Divorce me, untie, or break that knot again,
Take me to you, imprison me, for I
Except you enthrall me, never shall be free,
Nor ever chaste, except you ravish me.
John Donne 1572-1631

I hope the following exchange of office memoranda is fictitious⁶

FROM: Patty Lewis, Human Resources Director
TO: All Employees
RE: Christmas Party
DATE: December 1

I'm happy to inform you that the company Christmas Party will take place on December 23, starting at noon in the banquet room at Luigi's Open Pit Barbecue. No-host bar, but plenty of eggnog! We'll have a small band playing traditional carols ... feel free to sing along. And don't be surprised if our CEO shows up dressed as Santa Claus!

A Christmas tree will be lit at 1:00 P.M. Exchange of gifts among employees can be done at that time, however, no gift should be over \$10.00 to make the giving of gifts easy for everyone's pockets. This gathering is only for employees! Our CEO will make a special announcement at that time! Merry Christmas to you and your family.

FROM: Patty Lewis, Human Resources Director
TO: All Employees
DATE: December 2

In no way was yesterday's memo intended to exclude our Jewish employees. We recognize that Chanukah is an important holiday that often coincides with Christmas, though unfortunately not this year. However, from now on we're calling it our "Holiday Party." The same policy applies to

⁶ Although I note from the *Financial Times* of 26.9.01 that at IKEA "to avoid offending its non-Christian and teetotal staff, there'll be no more corporate Julefrokost ... Instead, staff will get an 'international culture day'. Out too are wedding presents (offensive to non-married people) and birthday gifts (offensive to Jehovah's witnesses)." No – I'm not making this up.

employees who are celebrating Kwanza at this time. There will be no Christmas tree. No Christmas Carols sung. We will have another type of music for your enjoyment. Happy now? Happy Holidays to you and your family.

FROM: Patty Lewis, Human Resources Director
TO: All Employees
DATE: December 3

Regarding the note I received from a member of Alcoholics Anonymous requesting a non-drinking table ~ you didn't sign your name. I'm happy to accommodate this request, but if I put a sign on a table that reads, "AA Only," you wouldn't be anonymous anymore. How am I supposed to handle this? Somebody?

Forget about the gift exchange; no gifts are allowed since the union members feel that \$10.00 is too much money and executives believe \$10.00 is very little for a gift. NO GIFT EXCHANGE WILL BE ALLOWED.

FROM: Patty Lewis, Human Resources Director
To: All Employees
DATE: December 7

What a diverse group we are! I had no idea that December 20 begins the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, which forbids eating and drinking during daylight hours. There goes the party! Seriously, we can appreciate how a luncheon this time of year does not accommodate our Muslim employees' beliefs. Perhaps Luigi's can hold off on serving your meal until the end of the party ~ the days are so short this time of year ~ or else package everything for take-home in little foil swans. Will that work?

Meanwhile, I've arranged for members of Overeaters Anonymous to sit farthest from the dessert buffet and pregnant women will get the table closest to the restrooms. Gays are allowed to sit with each other. Lesbians do not have to sit with Gay men. Each will have their own table. Yes, there will be flower arrangement for the Gay men's table. To the person asking permission to cross dress, no cross-dressing is allowed. We will have booster seats for short people. Low-fat food will be available for those on a diet. We cannot control the salt used in the food - we suggest for those people with high blood pressure problems to taste first. There will be fresh fruits as dessert for Diabetics, the restaurant cannot supply "No Sugar" desserts. Sorry! Did I miss anything?

FROM: Patty Lewis, Human Resources Director
TO: All Employees
DATE: December 8

So December 22 marks the Winter Solstice ... what do you expect me to do, a tap-dance on your heads? Fire regulations at Luigi's prohibit the burning of sage by our "earth-based Goddess-worshipping" employees, but we'll try to accommodate your shamanic drumming circle during the band's breaks. Okay???

FROM: Patty Lewis, Human Resources Director
To: All Employees
Date: December 9

People, people, nothing sinister was intended by having our CEO dress up like Santa Claus! Even if the anagram of "Santa" does happen to be "Satan," there is no evil connotation to our own "little man in a red suit." It's a tradition, folks, like sugar shock at Halloween, or family feuds over the Thanksgiving turkey, or broken hearts on Valentine's Day. Could we lighten up? Please????????? Also the company has changed their mind about making a special announcement at the gathering. You will get a notification in the mail sent to your home.

FROM: Patty Lewis, Human Resources Director
TO: All #%%&\$**@ Employees
DATE: December 10

I have no #%%&*@*^ idea what the announcement is all about. What the > %#&^!@ do I care? I KNOW WHAT I AM GOING TO GET!!!!!!!!!!!!!! You change your address now and you are dead!!!!!!!!!!!!!! No more changes of address will be allowed in my office! Try to come in and change your address. I will have you hung from the ceiling in the warehouse!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

Vegetarians!?!?! I've had it with you people!!! We're going to keep this party at Luigi's Open Pit Barbecue whether you like it or not, so you can sit quietly at the table furthest from the "grill of death," as you so quaintly put it, and you'll get your #\$\$%^&*! salad bar, including hydroponic tomatoes. But you know they have feelings, too. Tomatoes scream when you slice them. I've heard them scream. I'm hearing them scream right now! HA!

I hope you all have a rotten holiday! Drive drunk and die, you hear me!!!!!!!!!!?

The Bitch from HELL!!!!!!!!!!

FROM: Terri Bishop, Acting Human Resources Director
TO: All Employees
DATE: December 14

I'm sure I speak for all of us in wishing Patty Lewis a speedy recovery from her stress-related illness, and I'll continue to forward your cards to her at the sanatorium. In the meantime, management has decided to cancel our Holiday Party and give everyone the afternoon of the 23rd off with full pay. Happy Holidays!⁷

* * * *

Several poets of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, even though much of their work is marred by the poetic conventions and sentimentality of the age, somehow surpass themselves in the sonnet form.

Now *Robert Browning 1812-89*

Out of your whole life give but a moment!
All of your life that has gone before,
All to come after it, -- so you ignore,
So you make perfect the present, -- condense,
In a rapture of rage, for perfection's endowment,

⁷ With thanks to John Tomaro – one of my most faithful providers of e-mail humour.

Thought and feeling and soul and sense --
 Merged in a moment which give me at last
 You around me for once, you beneath me, above me --
 Me -- sure that despite of time future, time past, --
 This tick of your life-time's one moment you love me!
 How long such suspension may linger? Ah, Sweet --
 The moment eternal -- just that and no more --
 When ecstasy's utmost we clutch at the core
 While cheeks burn, arms open, eyes shut and lips meet!

Death (*Thomas Hood 1799-1845*)⁸

It is not death, that sometime in a sigh
 This eloquent breath shall take its speechless flight;
 That sometime these bright stars, that now reply
 In sunlight to the sun, shall set in night;
 That this warm conscious flesh shall perish quite,
 And all life's ruddy springs forget to flow;
 That thoughts shall cease, and the immortal sprite
 Be lapped in alien clay and laid below;
 It is not death to know this,--but to know
 That pious thoughts, which visit at new graves
 In tender pilgrimage, will cease to go
 So duly and so oft,--and when grass waves
 Over the past-away, there may be then
 No resurrection in the minds of men.

The Dead (*Jones Very 1813-1880*)

I see them crowd on crowd they walk the earth
 Dry, leafless trees no Autumn wind laid bare,
 And in their nakedness find cause for mirth,
 And all unclad would winter's rudeness dare;
 No sap doth through their clattering branches flow,
 Whence springing leaves and blossoms bright appear;
 Their hearts the living God have ceased to know,
 Who gives the spring time to th'expectant year;
 They mimic life, as if from him to steal
 His glow of health to paint the livid cheek;
 They borrow words for thoughts they cannot feel,
 That with a seeming heart their tongue may speak;
 And in their show of life more dead they live
 Than those that to the earth with many tears they give.

The Sun God (*Aubrey de Vere 1814-1902*)

I saw the Master of the Sun. He stood
 High in his luminous car, himself more bright;
 An Archer of immeasurable might
 On his left shoulder hung his quivered load -
 Spurned by his Steeds the eastern mountain glowed -
 Forward his eager eye, and brow of light

He bent; and, while both hands that arch embowed,
 Shaft after shaft pursued the flying Night.
 No wings profaned that godlike form: around
 His neck high held an ever-moving crowd
 Of locks hung glistening: while such perfect sound
 Fell from his bowstring, that th'ethereal dome
 Thrilled as a dewdrop; and each passing cloud
 Expanded, whitening like the ocean foam.

Remember me when I am gone away,
 Gone far away into the silent land;
 When you can no more hold me by the hand,
 Nor I half turn to go, yet turning stay.
 Remember me when no more day by day
 You tell me of our future that you plann'd:
 Only remember me; you understand
 It will be late to counsel then or pray.
 Yet if you should forget me for a while
 And afterwards remember, do not grieve:
 For if the darkness and corruption leave
 A vestige of the thoughts that once I had,
 Better by far you should forget and smile
 Than that you should remember and be sad.
Christina Rossetti 1830-94

Farewell to Juliet (*Wilfrid Blunt 1840-1922*)

I see you, Juliet, still, with your straw hat
 Loaded with vines, and with your dear pale face,
 On which those thirty years so lightly sat,
 And the white outline of your muslin dress.
 You wore a little fichu trimmed with lace
 And crossed in front, as was the fashion then,
 Bound at your waist with a broad band or sash,
 All white and fresh and virginally plain.
 There was a sound of shouting far away
 Down in the valley, as they called to us,
 And you, with hands clasped seeming still to pray
 Patience of fate, stood listening to me thus
 With heaving bosom. There a rose lay curled.
 It was the reddest rose in all the world.

⁸ The next three poets, Thomas Hood, Jones Very and Aubrey de Vere, are all much underestimated: their poetry – particularly the sonnets – is well worth exploring.

She to Him (*Thomas Hardy 1840-1928*)

When you shall see me in the toils of Time,
My lauded beauties carried off from me,
My eyes no longer stars as in their prime,
My name forgot of Maiden Fair and Free;
When, in your being, heart concedes to mind,
And judgment, though you scarce its process know,
Recalls the excellencies I once enshrined,
And you are irked that they have withered so;
Remembering mine the loss is, not the blame,
That Sportsman Time but rears his brood to kill,
Knowing me in my soul the very same
One who would die to spare you touch of ill!
Will you not grant to old affection's claim
The hand of friendship down Life's sunless hill?

The Dead Poet (*Lord Alfred Douglas 1870-1945*)

I dreamed of him last night, I saw his face
All radiant and unshadowed of distress,
And as of old, in music measureless,
I heard his golden voice and marked him trace
Under the common thing the hidden grace,
And conjure wonder out of emptiness,
Till mean things put on beauty like a dress
And all the world was an enchanted place.
And then methought outside a fast locked gate
I mourned the loss of unrecorded words,
Forgotten tales and mysteries half said,
Wonders that might have been articulate,
And voiceless thoughts like murdered singing birds.
And so I woke and knew that he was dead.

The melancholy year is dead with rain.
Drop after drop on every branch pursues.

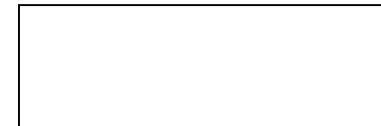
⁹ As readers of *Christmas Pudding* will know, I put Hardy in a class above the other Victorians. Although not wholly successful (some of the images are a little strained), this sonnet is clearly of Shakespearean inspiration, cf *Sonnet LXXIII*

That time of year thou mayst in me behold
When yellow leaves, or none, or few, do hang
Upon those boughs which shake against the cold,
Bare ruin'd choirs, where late the sweet birds sang.
In me thou seest the twilight of such day
As after sunset fadeth in the west,
Which by and by black night doth take away,
Death's second self, that seals up all in rest.
In me thou see'st the glowing of such fire
That on the ashes of his youth doth lie,
As the death-bed whereon it must expire
Consumed with that which it was nourish'd by.

This thou perceivest, which makes thy love more strong,
To love that well which thou must leave ere long.

From far away beyond the drizzled flues
A twilight saddens to the window pane.
And dimly thro' the chambers of the brain,
From place to place and gently touching, moves
My one and irrecoverable love's
Dear and lost shape one other time again.
So in the last of autumn for a day
Summer or summer's memory returns.
So in a mountain desolation burns
Some rich belated flower, and with the gray
Sick weather, in the world of rotting ferns
From out the dreadful stones it dies away.
Trumbull Stickney 1874-1904

I had here originally intended to include a lampoon on the US Presidential elections in 2000, which inspired much humour and satire. The events of 11 September 2001 lead me instead simply to record the gaping hole left in our sensibilities by this challenge to all civilised values – and, at the same time, my hope that our response may serve to uphold those values.



The Times of London devotes a regular column to the reassignments of Church of England clerics. Buried among the announcements of August 21, 1974 was the following¹⁰:

Diocese of Salisbury. The Rev J. E. B. Cattell, Vicar of Piddletrenthide with Alton Pancras and Plush, to be priest-in-charge of Buckhorn Weston and Kington Magna.

This simple notice resulted in a flood of letters from readers during the next fortnight, of which the following:

There can surely never have been a more musical-sounding appointment in *The Times* than that of August 21, announcing that the vicar of Piddletrenthide with Alton Pancras and Plush is to be priest-in-charge of Buckhorn Weston and Kington Magna. Is there really a parish of Piddletrenthide with Alton Pancras and Plush? If so, I will have to retire there; it certainly is an improvement on Maidstone? In 30 years' time, however, when I am ready to retire, that parish, too, will probably have a post-code, and it will merely be known as "Pwapap", for short. *P. H. H. Moore*

When, some years ago I was down in that part of the world I saw a signpost which, on one of its arms, read: Plush, Folly, Mappowder, Piddletrenthide. *Simon Borrett*

Sir, Mr Moore enquires in your issue of August 24 whether there really is such a place as

¹⁰ Quoted in *Word Recreations*, by A. Ross Eckler, Dover Publications, New York 1978

Piddletrenthide. Yes, Mr Moore, there is; it's in West Dorset and is as delightful as its name implies. We also have Toller Pocorum, Sydling St Nicholas, Whitchurch Canonicorum, and Rhyme Intrinsic, to name but four others. Can anywhere in the country match this area for the haunting quality of its village names? *Trevor Jones*

Sir, Mr Trevor Jones (Letters, August 30) has only to cross the border into Somerset to find village names just as evocative as those in Dorset. Wyke Champflower, Chilton Cantelo, Huish Episcopi, and Upton Noble are all within a few miles of my own village. *Digby Meller*

We read about Soho, Piccadilly, Petty France and Bedlam. Can you assure me that there really are such places in London? *R.Belgrave, West Lodge, Piddlebinton, Dorset*

Sir, Mr Moore's choice of parish for retirement is indeed difficult to fault (Piddletrenthide with Alton Pancras and Plush), but for sheer pleasure to the ear the redeployment of ecclesiastical strength in Yorkshire which appeared in your columns some 14 years ago remains supreme: "the Rev. G.D. Beaglehole, Vicar of Kexby with Wilberfoss to be Vicar of Bossall with Buttercrambe." *Aidan Reynolds*

Sir, I have looked in vain for any mention of Sixpenny Handley (6d Handley) in Dorset in your correspondence columns. Are we to assume that it is now 2½ p Handley? *Anny's, Mother Superior, Convent of St John Baptist*

Sir, For sheer deployment of ecclesiastical strength as well as for aural harmony Yorkshire can do even better than Mr Reynolds is prepared to allow, for in 1960 you also announced: "The Rev G. Christie, Rector of Roos with Tunstall-in-Holderness, Vicar of Garton with Grimston and Hilston and Rural Dean of South Holderness to be Vicar of Pocklington with Yapham-cum-Meltonby and Owsthorpe with Kilnwick Percy, and Millington with Great Givendale, and Rural Dean of Pocklington." It is understandably with regret that I sign myself as Michael Peel, Rector of Iver Heath (only).

Sir, I have greatly enjoyed this correspondence. I respectfully submit my own personal contribution. Gonville Aubie P French-Beytagh, Rector of the United Parishes of Saint Vedast alias Foster with St Michael-le-Querne and St Matthew, Friday Street with St Peter, Cheap; St Alban, Wood Street with St Olave, Silver Street, St Michael, Wood Street and St Mary Staining; St Lawrence Jewry with St Mary Magdalene, Milk Street and St Michael Bassishaw; and St Anne & St Agnes, Gresham Street with St John Zachary, Gresham Street; and St Mary Aldermanbury

Sir, We in Hampshire can surely beat them all with our three hearty Wallops -- Over, Middle and Nether. *A. Murray*

Sir, One signpost in Shropshire reads simply: Homer 1, Wigwig 2. How's that for brevity and wit? *Anna A. M. Wells*

Sir, My current favourite in this class for any country is the eructative name of a station on the railway line from Brussels to Louvain: Erps-Kwerps. *Margaret Barclay*

Sir, A few miles to the East of Oxford on the A40 a signpost points to "The Baldons" This simple omnibus name conceals the identities of Great Baldon, Little Baldon, Baldon in-between, Marsh Baldon, Toot Baldon, Baldon-on-the-Green, and Baldon. *John H. Edmonds*

Sir, May I on behalf of Scotland offer a brief contribution to this correspondence and draw attention to the tiny but ancient fishing village on the south shore of the Firth of Forth, which

proudly bears the name "Society"? *Maurice Lyell, Puddephat's Farm*

Sir, the first place listed in Part Two of the 1961 Census Index of Place Names aptly describes the efforts of your readers in this silly correspondence: Labour-in-vain. *M. R. Huxley*

Paul Fleming (1609-1640) is one of the most distinguished sonneteers in the German language. His short life was remarkable in that he spent four years of it as a member of the trade delegation sent to Russia and Persia by Duke Frederick III of Holstein-Gottorp -- one of the most enlightened figures in German history. The account by Adam Olearius of the tribulations of the mission is the major source of information on Russia at that time -- the delegation witnessed at first hand the closing phase of the "time of trouble" (смѣра), which has so marked the Russian psyche, and was received in Moscow by the first Romanov Tsar¹¹. He wrote the following on his arrival in Circassia on the return journey from Persia, prompted by the name-day of one of his companions. Fleming's sonnets are unusual in that he uses a hexameter, rather than the Petrarchan alexandrine or Shakespearean pentameter. Fleming also wrote the text used by Bach in Cantata 97 *In allen meinen Taten*.

| | |
|---|---|
| <p>Auff hundert Ach und Weh, auff tausend Noth und Mühen, Auff hundert tausend Leid kommt ein Tag endlich her, der alles Ach und Weh, Noth, Mühe, Leid, Beschwer, auff einmahl nimmet hin. Ihr Götter habts verliehen, Daß wir nun sehn vor uns ein neues Glück e blühen. Der Weg ist über halb. Es kömmt nicht ohn gefahr, Daß wir noch alle stehn, und können nach Begehr In unser Vaterland, das liebe, wieder ziehen. Sey, Bruder, froh mit uns, und stell' uns an ein Fest, denn daß uns auch für dich, Gott heut' Ihm danken lest, das thut Er Ihm zur Ehr', und dir und uns zu Glück e. So feyre deinen Tag, und schaff uns Lust genug. Greiff hurtig in das Geld; es geht nunmehr zu rück e. Auff eine reiche Frau ist dis der erste Sprung.</p> | <p>A hundred cries of anguish, a thousand struggles, crises, A hundred thousand sorrows, then comes a day at last Which now all anguish, crises, struggles, pain, complaint Doth cancel out. Ye Gods have so determined that We see today good fortune fresh before us bloom. Our journey's more than halfway run. It's not by chance That we have all survived and freely each at will To our beloved Fatherland can now return. Brother, share our joy and make for us a feast For if today our Fatherland is blessed by God, It is for honour's sake, a joy for us and thee. Celebrate thy day and make us happy too. Reach deep into thy purse; we're homeward bound. This is the first big step towards a wealthy wife.</p> |
|---|---|

Fleming composed his own epitaph:

¹¹ For the last 150 years of the Russian monarchy, Holsteiners sat on the throne of the Tsars. Nicholas II, the last Tsar, enjoyed, among others, the title of Duke of Schleswig-Holstein, Stormarn, Dithmarschen and Oldenburg. (*Deutsche und Russen – Tausend Jahre gemeinsame Geschichte*; Goldmann-Stern Bücher 1983 – with thanks to Helga Hoppe.)

| | |
|--|--|
| <p>Ich war an Kunst und Gut und Stande gross und reich, Des Glückes lieber Sohn, von Eltern guter Ehren, Frei, meine, kunnte mich aus meinen Mitteln nähren, Mein Schall floh überweit, kein Landsmann sang mir gleich, Von Reisen hochgepreist, für keiner Mühe bleich, Jung, wachsam, unbesorgt. Man wird mich nennen hören, Bis dass die letzte Glut dies alles wird verstören. Dies, deutsche Klarien, dies Ganze dank ich euch. Verzeiht mir, bin ichs wert, Gott, Vater, Liebste, Freunde. Ich sag euch gute Nacht und trete willig ab. Sonst alles ist getan bis an das schwarze Grab. Was frei dem Tode steht, das tu er seinem Feinde. Was bin ich viel besorgt, den Otem aufzugeben? An mir ist minder nichts, das lebet, als mein Leben.</p> | <p>In skill, profession, wealth I was both great and rich, Fortune's cherished son, my parents worthy both, Free, mine own, with purse enough to feed myself, My sound flew far, no countryman could sing as I, For my travels praised, no effort was too much, Young, vigilant and carefree. My name will be recalled, Till hell's last fire destroys all here on earth. For this, for all of this, I thank you, German clarions. Such is my worth: forgive me God, wife, father, friends. I wish you all good night and willingly step down. All tasks were done before I entered death's black grave. What's left to give to death, is to the foe bequeathed. Why should I be concerned to breathe my life's last breath? Nothing lives on of me, save for the life I lived.</p> |
|--|--|



There is some very fine poetry in the English Hymnary. Among the best is the work of Isaac Watts (1674-1748), a prolific hymn-writer. Son of a Non-conformist imprisoned twice for his religious views, Watts' taste for verse showed itself in early childhood, and his promise caused friends to offer him a university education, assuming he would be ordained in the Church of England. However, he declined and instead entered a Nonconformist Academy at Stoke Newington in 1690. He left the Academy at age 20 and spent two years at home; it was during this period that he wrote the bulk of his *Hymns and Spiritual Songs*, published 1707-1709. My favourites¹² since childhood have been

When I survey the wondrous cross
On which the Prince of glory died,
My richest gain I count but loss,
And pour contempt on all my pride.

Forbid it, Lord, that I should boast,
Save in the death of Christ my God!
All the vain things that charm me most,
I sacrifice them to His blood.

See from His head, His hands, His feet,
Sorrow and love flow mingled down!
Did e'er such love and sorrow meet,
Or thorns compose so rich a crown?

His dying crimson, like a robe,
Spreads o'er His body on the tree;
Then I am dead to all the globe,
And all the globe is dead to me.

Were the whole realm of nature mine,
That were a present far too small:
Love so amazing, so divine,
Demands my soul, my life, my all.

O God, our help in ages past,
Our hope for years to come,
Our shelter from the stormy blast,
And our eternal home!

Under the shadow of Thy throne,
Thy saints have dwelt secure;
Sufficient is Thine arm alone,
And our defense is sure.

Before the hills in order stood,
Or earth received her frame,
From everlasting Thou art God,
To endless years the same.

A thousand ages in Thy sight
Are like an evening gone;
Short as the watch that ends the night
Before the rising sun.

Time, like an ever-rolling stream,
Bears all its sons away;
They fly, forgotten, as a dream
Dies at the op'ning day.

O God our help in ages past,
Our hope for years to come,
Be Thou our guard while life shall last,
And our eternal home.

The text of both radiates a confident and unshakeable faith, at odds with – yet at the same time somewhat reassuring in – today's sceptical world. The poem by Georg M. Pfefferkorn, written in 1667, and used by Bach in his Cantatas BWV 64 and 94 – expresses a similar faith¹³.

¹³ The illusions of the material world are also a recurrent theme in other religions – the following is from the translation of an Ismaili hymn “Hazrat Ali - Kalame Mowla”:

Misled is the one who rejoices in the world
as the thirsty one sees in the blazing sun
that the whole jungle is filled with water
it is dust that he sees in the form of water.
The whole world is dust,
bury worldly goods, they too are dust,
in this dust you see gold, silver and precious gems
it is your sight that is faulty.

¹² The first, sung to the melody *Rockingham* (traditional, arranged by Edward Miller, 1731-1807), must be the most beautiful hymn in the book; the second, however, sung to the melody *St. Anne* (probably composed by William Croft, 1678-1727), runs it pretty close – the devil doesn't by any means have all the best tunes.

Was frag' ich nach der Welt
 Und allen ihren Schätzen,
 Wenn ich mich nur an dir,
 Herr Jesu, kann ergötzen!
 Dich hab' ich einzig mir
 Zur Wollust vorgestellt,
 Du, du bist meine Ruh';
 Was frag' ich nach der Welt!

Die Welt ist wie ein Rauch,
 Der in der Luft vergehet,
 Und einem Schatten gleich,
 Der kurze Zeit bestehet;
 Mein Jesus aber bleibt,
 Wenn alles bricht und fällt;
 Er ist mein starker Fels,
 Was frag' ich nach der Welt!

Die Welt sucht Ehr' und Ruhm
 Bei hoherhabnen Leuten
 Und denkt nicht einmal dran,
 Wie bald doch diese gleiten;
 Das aber, was mein Herz
 Vor andern rühmlich hält,
 Ist Jesus nur allein;
 Was frag' ich nach der Welt!

Die Welt sucht Geld und Gut
 Und kann nicht eher rasten,
 Sie habe denn zuvor
 Den Mammon in dem Kasten;
 Ich weiß ein besser Gut,
 Wonach mein Herze stellt:
 Ist Jesus nur mein Schatz,
 Was frag' ich nach der Welt!

Watts was not the only poetic hymn writer in English. That greatly underestimated poet, Rudyard Kipling (1865-1936), also wrote some resounding hymns.

God of our fathers, known of old,
 Lord of our far flung battle line,
 Beneath whose awful hand we hold
 Dominion over palm and pine—
 Lord God of Hosts, be with us yet,
 Lest we forget—lest we forget!

The tumult and the shouting dies;
 The captains and the kings depart:
 Still stands Thine ancient sacrifice,

An humble and a contrite heart.
 Lord God of Hosts, be with us yet,
 Lest we forget—lest we forget!

Far called, our navies melt away;
 On dune and headland sinks the fire:
 Lo, all our pomp of yesterday
 Is one with Nineveh and Tyre!
 Judge of the Nations, spare us yet,
 Lest we forget—lest we forget!

If, drunk with sight of power, we loose
 Wild tongues that have not Thee in awe,
 Such boastings as the Gentiles use,
 Or lesser breeds without the Law—
 Lord God of Hosts, be with us yet,
 Lest we forget—lest we forget!

For heathen heart that puts her trust
 In reeking tube and iron shard,
 All valiant dust that builds on dust,
 And guarding, calls not Thee to guard,
 For frantic boast and foolish word—
 Thy mercy on Thy people, Lord!

More surprising, perhaps, is the following delightful hymn by the much loved cricket commentator, John Arlott (1914-1991)¹⁴.

By the rutted roads we follow,
 Fallow fields are resting now;
 All along the waking country
 Soil is waiting for the plough.

In the yard the plough is ready,
 Ready to the ploughman's hand,
 Ready for the crow-straight furrow,
 Farmer's sign across God's land.

God, in this good land you lend us,
 Bless the service of the share;
 Light our thinking with your wisdom,
 Plant your patience in our care.

This is first of all man's labours,
 Man must always plough the earth;
 God, be with us at the ploughing,
 Touch our harvest at its birth.

¹⁴ Arlott had many talents: not least that of wit. He is reported to have said, commenting on a cricketer by the name of Cunis, that "his bowling, like his name, is neither one thing nor another".

Ar Hyd Y Nos (see opening section) is one of the most widely known and best loved Welsh folk songs. The tune was first recorded in the *Musical Relics Of The Welsh Bards* (c.

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|---|--|
| Deep the silence 'round us spreading all through the night. Dark the path that we are treading all through the night. Still the coming day discerning by the hope within us burning. | Klar und mild die Sterne schimmern In stiller Nacht, Heimlich flüsternd raunt ihr Flimmern In stiller Nacht: Finsternis sinkt hüllend nieder; Brüder, singt, die ew'gen Lieder, |
| To the dawn our footsteps turning all through the night. Hoff' amantad i'r sêr ddywedant Ar hyd y nos Star of faith, the dark adorning, Dyma'r ffordd i fro gogoniant;" all through the night Ar hyd y nos leads us fearless 'wards the morning Golau arall yw tywyllwch, all through the night Thou art danger's wise bright torch, Ffwrdd dda i'r dydd From the hope of dawn new dawn Ffwrdd dda i'r dydd promises of a glass tomorrow all through the night. | Dass die Sphären klingen wieder In stiller Nacht. O mor sinol gwëna seren Ar hyd y nos Himmel lächelt, wenn wir blinken Talcu o'i chwaer ddacaren; In stiller Nacht, Schwester Erde grüssend winken "Nos yw henaint pan ddaw ystudd, In stiller Nacht Nad ond huddschyn all i'r dydd, Ddod o'r awgrymion i'r dydd, Ddod o'r awgrymion i'r dydd, Llwydd i'r dydd Last night's light him senden In stiller Nacht. |
| <i>Set to the original tune by an anonymous author</i> | <i>Translation from the original by Carl G. Hardebeck¹⁵</i> |

1784). The Welsh words are by John Ceiriog Hughes (1832-1887). It is sung in English as a hymn ("God who madest earth and heaven"), as a song (below) and as a lullaby ("Sleep my child, and peace attend thee", words by Sir Harold Boulton - 1859-1935 – author of *The Skye Boat Song*).

¹⁵ Carl Hardebeck was one of the pioneer musicologists and collectors of Gaelic folk music. Born in London in 1869, Hardebeck was blind from birth and enjoyed a sheltered childhood in a cultured home. His father, Carl Joseph Hardebeck, a wealthy expatriate German and naturalised British subject, made his fortune in the jewellery trade in London. His mother, Catherine Jones, was of Welsh origin, and it was probably thanks to her that Carl developed his enthusiasm for Gaelic traditional music. See <http://www.historyireland.com/magazine/features/feat1.html>

I am grateful to Rafique Keshavjee for drawing my attention to *Remarkable Names of Real People*, compiled by John Train, whose day job was investment counseling. Unfortunately, the book is currently out of print, but *Amazon.com* managed to find me a copy. It contains wonders such as:

A. Moron, Director of Education, Virgin Islands
B. Brooklyn Bridge, John Hancock Insurance Company
Messrs. Bull and Schytt, Glaciologists
Shine Soon Sun, Geophysicist, Houston, Texas
Firmin A. Gryp, Banker, Palo Alto, California and, of course,
Cardinal Sin, Archbishop of Manila, as well as the improbable but real
Superporn Poopatanna, from New York

My own collection of business cards and office correspondence revealed the following:

SEXER S.A., Madrid, Specialist in Mini-Power Stations
Ms Comfort Ayisibea Tettey, Darlings Human Development Foundation, Ghana
Carole Houlihan, development programme officer
Mr. T. G. Packe and Ms. Julie-Ann Clyma, trekking enthusiasts
L. William McNutt, Jr., President Collin Street Bakery, Corsicana, Texas (specialists in "DeLuxe Fruitcakes")
Mr. and Mrs. Aydelott, nursing specialists
Agnes Aidoo, UNICEF Representative, Tanzania
Mr. Gerard L. Penecilla, College of Science, West Visayas University, Philippines
Dr. A.D. Dikshit, Agricultural Finance Corporation, Bombay – followed by
Rev. Tobias Dungdung, Gumla, India – and, of course, Dr. Potty, Mysore, India
Cliff Pease, Primary Health Care Consultant
Richard Pomfrit, Central Asia Specialist
Paul A. Wiget, Daniel Construction Co. International
Mr. Kumkum Ghosh, Consultant in Education

Abdul Karim Ghoul, UNHCR, Afghanistan
 Dr. Lusty, Consultant on family planning
 Dr. Pretzell, Food Security Division, German Development Ministry
 Mme. Françoise Biestro, Banqueting Department, Hotel du Château d'Ermenonville
 Mr. Elmo Drilling, USDA Forest Service
 Mr. Julian Gayfer, Community Forestry Project, British High Commission, Ghana
 Dr. A.G. Beets, Rural Development Specialist
 Professor Mark Swilling, Spier Wine Estate, South Africa
 R. Dearlove and A. Godson, UK Diplomats posted to Geneva
 Susan Lively, US State Department Bureau for Population, Refugees and Migration
 Jonathan Hartop, Sales Manager, Aston-Martin and Jaguar dealership, Geneva
 O. Wiggo Bang, Artistic Director, Värmland Classic Festival, Sweden

and a selection of the very apposite names of the members of the Board of Trustees of the 40th Anniversary International Development Conference:

Peter G. Bourne, Global Water; Barbara J. Bramble, National Wildlife Federation; Samuel E. Bunker, National Rural Electric Cooperative Association; Philander P. Claxton, World Population Society; Susan Goodwillie, the Goodwillie Group; Thomas B. Keehn, InterAction; Sherry Rockey, League of Women Voters; David Smock; Crocker Snow Jr; Ronald E. Springwater; James Upchurch.

I find it very appropriate that one of the best champagne producing villages in the Rheims district is called Bouzy.



In addition, there are a number of names from the sub-continent, ending in -wala, which sometimes provoke amusement, although they are no more remarkable than the English names Smith, Turner, Weaver, Cartwright or Devereux. For the record, however, let me state that I have known Messrs. Karachiwala, Peppermintwala, Tiviwala as well as A. Furniturewala and A. Poonawala.

And finally, for those who have always wanted to know, KARNAL BUNT is not what you might have thought but a fungal disease of wheat and triticale (a hybrid of wheat and rye).

More Gibbon¹⁶

Of the revolt of Bonosus and Proculus: 'The most distinguished merit of those two officers was their respective prowess, of the one in the combats of Bacchus, of the other in those of Venus'. (*Gibbon's Footnote:* 'A very surprising instance is recorded of the prowess of Proculus. He had taken one hundred Sarmatian virgins. The rest of the story he must relate in his own language: *Ex his una nocte decem inivi; omnes tamen, quod in me erat, mulieres intra dies quindecim reddidi*'.)

Cancellarius, (Latin for doorkeeper): 'This word, so humble in its origin, has by a singular fortune risen into the title of the first great office of state in the monarchies of Europe'.

Victory of Constantine over the Gallic legions at Verona: 'They wanted chains for so great a multitude of captives; and the whole council was at a loss; but the sagacious conqueror imagined the happy expedient of converting into fetters the swords of the vanquished.'

'The triumphal arch of Constantine still remains a melancholy proof of the decline of the arts, and a singular testimony of the meanest vanity. As it was not possible to find in the capital of the empire a sculptor who was capable of adorning that public monument, the arch of Trajan, without any respect either for his memory or for the rules of propriety, was stripped of its most elegant figures. The difference of times and persons, of actions and characters, was totally disregarded. The Parthian captives appear prostrate at the feet of a prince who never carried his arms beyond the Euphrates; and curious antiquarians can still discover the head of Trajan on the trophies of Constantine.'

'Our curiosity is naturally prompted to inquire by what means the Christian faith obtained so remarkable a victory over the established religions of the earth. To this inquiry an obvious but satisfactory answer may be returned; that it was owing to the convincing evidence of the doctrine itself, and to the ruling providence of its great Author. But as truth and reason seldom find so favourable a reception in the world, and as the wisdom of Providence frequently condescends to use the passions of the human heart, and the general circumstances of mankind, as instruments to execute its purpose, we may still be permitted, though with becoming submission, to ask, not indeed what were the first, but what were the secondary causes of the rapid growth of the Christian church? It will, perhaps, appear that it was most effectually favoured and assisted by the five following causes: I. The inflexible, and, if we may use the expression, the intolerant zeal of the Christians, derived, it is true, from the Jewish religion, but purified from the narrow and unsocial spirit which, instead of inviting, had deterred the Gentiles from embracing the law of Moses. II. The doctrine of a future life, improved by every additional circumstance which could give weight and efficacy to that important truth. III. The miraculous powers ascribed to the primitive church. IV. The pure and austere morals of the Christians. V. The union and discipline of the Christian republic, which gradually formed an independent and increasing state in the heart of the Roman Empire.' (*Chapter 15*)

On the spread of Christianity: 'The theologian may indulge in the pleasing task of describing Religion as

¹⁶ Gibbon – in part at least because of his anti-clerical remarks and sarcasm at the expense of the English establishment – never received the recognition he deserved during his lifetime. Walter Savage Landor (1775-1864) paid Gibbon just tribute in the following epigram:

The grandest writer of late ages
 Who wrapt Rome up in golden pages,
 Whom scarcely Livius equalled, Gibbon,
 Died without star or cross or ribbon.

she descended from Heaven, arrayed in her native purity. A more melancholy duty is imposed on the historian. He must discover the inevitable mixture of error and corruption which she contracted in a long residence on earth, among a weak and degenerate race of beings.'

* * * *

Pass the Port

Yet another golf joke, with apologies to non-golfers:

A man and his wife were playing a round of golf. At the first tee, the wife asked the husband: "Darling, if I died, would you marry again?"

The husband, who was just addressing the ball, was visibly irritated: "Maybe I would, maybe I wouldn't - let's talk about it some other time. Let me concentrate on my drive."

Just as the husband was preparing his approach shot, the wife asked "If you did marry again, would you bring her to live in our house?"

The husband, even more irritated: "Maybe I would, maybe I wouldn't, but please let me concentrate on my approach shot."

On the green, the husband was just lining up his putt, when the wife asked: "If you did marry again, would you bring her to play golf here?"

The husband missed his putt: "Maybe I would, maybe I wouldn't, but look what you're doing to my concentration."

As they were walking over to the second tee, the wife came back to the subject: "If you did bring her to play golf here, I hope you wouldn't let her use my clubs."

The husband: "No dear, she's left-handed."

I regret I cannot remember the origin of the following (Alois at work) – but with apologies to the source ...

Even by the standards of the day, my grandfather was useless around the house. Legend has it that while Grandma was giving birth to their seventh child, Grandfather was dozing peacefully by the fire – until the irate midwife told him to round up the rest of the children, bath them and put them to bed.

This he did, eventually. One toddler, however, refused to settle and cried piteously. For some time, Grandfather tried to comfort him, but without success.

"What *is* the matter with him?" he asked at last in exasperation.

The other children replied wearily: "He lives next door."

The next was told to me as a "true story" - but when I heard it told on a French TV

programme this year I assigned it to the category of "urban legends"¹⁷.

A couple with a dog moved into a new neighbourhood. Their neighbours had a pet rabbit which used to run freely in the garden, behind a wire enclosure. The neighbours warned the newly arrived couple that they must keep a tight check on their dog and ensure that he did not worry their rabbit.

After a few weeks, the newly arrived couple were horrified to catch their dog returning with a dead rabbit in his jaws. They checked the neighbours' wire enclosure and, sure enough, the dog had dug a gap under the wire.

They cleaned up the dead rabbit, which bore all the signs of having been dragged through the dirt by the dog and, having made a careful note of the rabbit's exact colouring, went to the nearest pet shop and bought a rabbit resembling as much as possible the dead one.

They returned home and, at night, slipped the new rabbit back into the neighbours' garden and filled up the hole their dog had made under the wire fence.

A few days later they met someone else living in their street, who asked if they had heard the extraordinary thing that had happened to their neighbours: 'Would you believe that their rabbit took ill and died; they buried it in the garden and then, the next morning, there it was again as if nothing had happened?'

* * * *

Christmas Pudding 2000 included a warning about a new computer virus called Stunkenwhite. The following delightful vignette is from the Introduction by E.B. White to the revised edition of *The Elements of Style*.¹⁸.

At the close of the first World War, when I was a student at Cornell, I took a course called English 8. My professor was William Strunk Jr. A textbook required for the course was a slim volume called *The Elements of Style*, whose author was the professor himself. The year was 1919. The book was known on the campus in those days as "the little book," with the stress on the word "little." It had been privately printed by the author.

I passed the course, graduated from the university, and forgot the book but not the professor. Some thirty-eight years later, the book bobbed up again in my life when Macmillan commissioned me to revise it for the college market and the general trade. Meantime, Professor Strunk had died.

The Elements of Style, when I re-examined it in 1957, seemed to me to contain rich deposits of gold. It was Will Strunk's *parvum opus*, his attempt to cut the vast tangle of English rhetoric down to size and write its rules and principles on the head of a pin. Will himself had hung the tag "little" on the book; he referred to it sardonically and with secret pride as "the little book," always giving the word "little" a special twist, as though he were putting a spin on a ball. In its original form, it was a forty-three-page summation of the case for cleanliness, accuracy, and brevity in the use of English. Today fifty-two years later, its vigor is unimpaired, and for sheer pith I think it probably sets a record that is not likely to be broken. Even after I got through tampering with it, it was still a tiny thing, a barely

¹⁷ See "The Vanishing Hitchhiker - Urban legends and their meanings", by Jan Harold Brunvand, Picador 1981. Urban legends are described as "the stories that always happened to a friend of a relative of the man in the pub who's telling it to you." Some of them have gained so much credibility that they regularly appear as genuine news.

¹⁸ William Strunk Jr. and E.B. White, Macmillan 1967; with thanks to David Nygaard.

tarnished gem. Seven rules of usage, eleven principles of composition, a few matters of form, and a list of words and expressions commonly misused - that was the sum and substance of Professor Strunk's work.

Professor Strunk was a positive man. His book contains rules of grammar phrased as direct orders. In the main I have not tried to soften his commands, or modify his pronouncements, or remove the special objects of his scorn. I have tried, instead, to preserve the flavor of his discontent while slightly enlarging the scope of the discussion. The *Elements of Style* does not pretend to survey the whole field. Rather it proposes to give in brief space the principal requirements of plain English style. It concentrates on fundamentals: the rules of usage and principles of composition most commonly violated.

The reader will soon discover that these rules and principles are in the form of sharp commands, Sergeant Strunk snapping orders to his platoon. "Do not join independent clauses by a comma." (Rule 5.) "Do not break sentences in two." (Rule 6.) "Use the active voice." (Rule 14.) "Omit needless words." (Rule 17.) "Avoid a succession of loose sentences." (Rule 18.) "In summaries, keep to one tense." (Rule 21.) Each rule or principle is followed by a short hortatory essay, and usually the exhortation is followed by, or interlarded with, examples in parallel columns - the true vs. the false, the right vs. the wrong, the timid vs. the bold, the ragged vs. the trim. From every line there peers out at me the puckish face of my professor, his short hair parted neatly in the middle and combed down over his forehead, his eyes blinking incessantly behind steel-rimmed spectacles as though he had just emerged into strong light, his lips nibbling each other like nervous horses, his smile shutting to and fro under a carefully edged mustache.

"Omit needless words!" cries the author on page 23, and into that imperative Will Strunk really put his heart and soul. ...

He was a memorable man, friendly and funny. Under the remembered sting of his kindly lash, I have been trying to omit needless words since 1919, and although there are still many words that cry for omission and the huge task will never be accomplished, it is exciting to me to reread the masterly Strunkian elaboration of this noble theme. It goes:

Vigorous writing is concise. A sentence should contain no unnecessary words, a paragraph no unnecessary sentences, for the same reason that a drawing should have no unnecessary lines and a machine no unnecessary parts. This requires not that the writer make all his sentences short, or that he avoid all detail and treat his subjects only in outline, but that every word tell.

There you have a short, valuable essay on the nature and beauty of brevity - sixty-three words that could change the world. Having recovered from his adventure in prolixity (sixty-three words were a lot of words in the tight world of William Strunk Jr.), the professor proceeds to give a few quick lessons in prolixity. The student learns to cut the deadwood from "this is a subject that," reducing it to "this subject," a saving of three words. He learns to trim "used for fuel purposes" down to "used for fuel." He learns that he is being a chatterbox when he says "the question as to whether" and that he should just say "whether" - a saving of four words out of a possible five.

The professor devotes a special paragraph to the vile expression *the fact that*, a phrase that causes him to quiver with revulsion. The expression, he says, should be "revised out of every sentence in which it occurs". But a shadow of gloom seems to hang over the page, and you feel that he knows how hopeless his cause is. I suppose I have written *the fact that* a thousand times in the heat of composition, revised it out maybe five hundred times in the cool aftermath. To be batting only .500 this late in the season, to fail half the time to connect with this fat pitch, saddens me, for it seems a betrayal of the man who showed me how to swing at it and made the swinging seem worth while.

Dame vor dem Spiegel 1908

Wie in einem Schlaftrunk Spezerein
löst sie leise in dem flüssigklaren
Spiegel ihr ermüdetes Gebaren;
und sie tut ihr Lächeln ganz hinein.
Und sie wartet, dass die Flüssigkeit
davon steigt; dann gießt sie ihre Haare
in den Spiegel und, die wunderbare
Schulter hebend aus dem Abendkleid,
trinkt sie still aus ihrem Bild. Sie trinkt,
was ein Liebender im Taumel tränke,
prüfend, voller Misstrau; und sie winkt
erst der Zofe, wenn sie auf dem Grunde
ihres Spiegels Lichter findet, Schränke
und das Trübe einer späten Stunde.

Blaue Hortensie - Neue Gedichte 1907

So wie das letzte Grün in Farbentiegeln
sind diese Blätter, trocken, stumpf und rau,
hinter den Blütendolden, die ein Blau
nicht auf sich tragen, nur von ferne spiegeln.
Sie spiegeln es verweint und ungenau,
als wollten sie es wiederum verlieren,
und wie in alten blauen Briefpapieren
ist Gelb in ihnen, Violett und Grau;
Verwaschenes wie an einer Kinderschürze,
wie fühlt man eines kleinen Lebens Kürze.
Nichtmehrgetragenes, dem nichts mehr geschieht:

Lady in front of a mirror

Like spices in a potion for deep sleep,
in silence she dissolves into the crystal
fluid mirror her tired countenance;
immersing first all of her smile, she waits
until the liquid level mounts, and then
she pours her hair into the mirror and,
lifting perfect shoulders from her dress,
drinks in, in silence, what she sees there of
herself; then drinks, as might a lover in
delirium drink, suspicion in her taste,
full of mistrust; the chambermaid is only
called when, in the bottom of the mirror,
she sees the lighted lamps, the furniture
and subtle shades of grey of a late hour.

Blue Hortensia

The last green flakes within a can of paint
resemble these dry leaves - they're rough and raw
behind the petalled heads, not coated blue,
a hint of blue reflections from afar:
reflections rather blurred, a tear-stained blue,
as if they'd rather see it lose its tint,
and as in ancient letters tinged with blue
there is a trace of yellow, violet and grey;
as in a child's old apron, faded, something
worn no more, no longer of much use:
it intimates a small life's brevity.

I treasure *The Elements of Style* for its sharp advice, but I treasure it even more for the audacity and self-confidence of its author. Will knew where he stood. He was so sure of where he stood, and made his position so clear and so plausible, that his peculiar stance has continued to invigorate me - and, I am sure, thousands of other ex-students - during the years that have intervened since our first encounter. He had a number of likes and dislikes that were almost as whimsical as the choice of a necktie, yet he made them seem utterly convincing. He disliked the word *forceful* and advised us to use *forcible* instead. He felt that the word *clever* was greatly overused: "It is best restricted to ingenuity displayed in small matters." ...

It is encouraging to see how perfectly a book, even a dusty rule book, perpetuates and extends the spirit of a man. Will Strunk loved the clear, the brief, the bold, and his book is clear, brief, bold. Boldness is perhaps its chief distinguishing mark. On page 27, explaining one of his parallels, he says, "The left-hand version gives the impression that the writer is undecided or timid; he seems unable or afraid to choose one form of expression and hold to it" And his Rule 11 was "Make definite assertions." That was Will all over. He scorned the vague, the tame, the colorless, the irresolute. He felt it was worse to be irresolute than to be wrong. I remember a day in class when he leaned far forward, in his characteristic pose - the pose of a man about to impart a secret - and croaked, "If you don't know how to pronounce a word, say it loud! If you don't know how to pronounce a word, say it loud!" This comical piece of advice struck me as sound at the time, and I still respect it. Why compound ignorance with inaudibility? Why run and hide?

All through *The Elements of Style* one finds evidences of the author's deep sympathy for the reader. Will felt that the reader was in serious trouble most of the time, a man floundering in a swamp, and that it was the duty of anyone attempting to write English to drain this swamp quickly and get his

man up on dry ground, or at least throw him a rope. In revising the text, I have tried to hold steadily in mind this belief of his, this concern for the bewildered reader.

In the English classes of today, “the little book” is surrounded by longer, lower textbooks - books with permissive steering and automatic transitions. Perhaps the book has become something of a curiosity. To me, it still seems to maintain its original poise, standing, in a drafty time, erect, resolute, and assured. I still find the Strunkian wisdom a comfort, the Strunkian humor a delight, and the Strunkian attitude toward right-and-wrong a blessing undisguised.

* * * *

I read Rainer Maria Rilke’s poems for the first time in 2001 and consider him one of the greatest lyric poets in any language. His poems, while using language in a fully rational manner, employ imagery, rhythm and alliteration to create a precision and power of suggestion that go far beyond the meaning of the words. Here are four of his sonnets that illustrate these qualities.

| | |
|---|---|
| <p>Doch plötzlich scheint das Blau sich zu verneuen in einer von den Dolden, und man sieht ein rührend Blaues sich vor Grünem freuen.</p> <p>Vor dem Sommerregen 1906 Auf einmal ist aus allem Grün im Park man weiß nicht was, ein Etwas, fortgenommen; man fühlt ihn näher an die Fenster kommen und schweigsam sein. Inständig nur und stark ertönt aus dem Gehölz der Regenpfeifer, man denkt an einen Hieronymus: so sehr steigt irgend Einsamkeit und Eifer aus dieser einen Stimme, die der Guss erhören wird. Des Saales Wände sind mit ihren Bildern von uns fortgetreten als dürften sie nicht hören was wir sagen. Es spiegeln die verblichenen Tapeten das ungewisse Licht von Nachmittagen, in denen man sich fürchtete als Kind.</p> <p>Die Flamingos - <i>Jardin des plantes, Paris</i> 1908 In Spiegelbildern wie von Fragonard ist doch von ihrem Weiss und ihrer Röte nicht mehr gegeben, als dir einer böte, wenn er von seiner Freundin sagt: sie war noch sanft von Schlaf. Denn steigen sie ins Grüne und stehn, auf rosa Stielen leicht gedreht, beisammen, blühend, wie in einem Beet, verführen sie verführender als Phyrne sich selber; bis sie ihres Auges Bleiche hinhalsend bergen in der eignen Weiche, in welcher Schwarz und Fruchttrot sich versteckt. Auf einmal kreischt ein Neid durch die Voliere; sie aber haben sich erstaunt gestreckt und schreiten einzeln ins Imaginäre.</p> | <p>Then suddenly, in one lone petal head the blue revives, revealing now a moving blue filled with the joy of all things green</p> <p>Before the Summer Rain At once, from all the greenness in the park, there’s something indefinable removed; you feel it coming closer to the windows, silent in its approach. While from the wood the plover calls – an urgent, strident call which makes you think of a Hieronymus: such is the hint of solitude and ardour which this one voice evokes, to exorcise the coming downpour. Walls and pictures now abandon us as though the words we say breach some forbidden zone within this room. The faded wallpaper reflects uncertain contours in the light of afternoons of which we were afraid when we were young.</p> <p>The Flamingos A mirror image, Fragonard perhaps, in which the mix of white and red fades out in incomplete description, as one might evoke a loved one waking gently from deep sleep. And then they step into the green and stand, turning slightly on pink stalks, aligned in bloom, together in a bed, seductive more than Phyrne, they seduce themselves until, with neck outstretched, they cast the paleness of their eyes into their flanks: a subtle blend of black with rich fruit red. The aviary resounds at once with jealous cry but they just stretch and show surprise and stride alone into imagined worlds.</p> |
|---|---|

* * * *

Answering Machines:

- My wife and I can't come to the phone right now, but if you'll leave your name and number, we'll get back to you as soon as we're finished.
- Hi. This is John: If you are the phone company, I already sent the money. If you are my parents, please send money. If you are my financial aid institution, you didn't lend me enough money. If you are my friends, you owe me money. If you are a female, don't worry, I have plenty of money.
- Hello. I am David's answering machine. What are you?
- Hi, I'm not home right now, but my answering machine is, so you can talk to it instead.
- Hello! If you leave a message, I'll call you soon. If you leave a sexy message, I'll call sooner!
- Hi! John's answering machine is broken. This is his refrigerator. Please speak very slowly, and I'll stick your message to myself with one of these magnets.
- Hello, you are talking to a machine. I am capable of receiving messages. My owners do not need sliding windows or a hot tub, and their carpets are clean. They give to charity through their office and do not need their picture taken. If you're still with me, leave your name and number and they will get back to you.
- This is not an answering machine - this is a telepathic thought-recording device. After the tone, think about your name, your number and your reason for calling, and I'll think about returning your call.
- Hi. I'm probably home. I'm just avoiding someone I don't like. Leave me a message, and if I don't call back, it's you.
- Hi, this is George. I'm sorry I can't answer the phone right now. Leave a message and then wait by your phone until I call you back.
- If you are a burglar, then we're probably at home cleaning our weapons right now and can't come to the phone. Otherwise, we probably aren't home and it's safe to leave a message.
- Please leave a message. However, you have the right to remain silent. Everything you say will be recorded and will be used by us.
- Hi. Now you say something.

* * * *

In France, the sonnet has not enjoyed the same longevity nor the same ability to adapt to different styles of expression as in England. Popular in France in the seventeenth century, the sonnet is – with the exception of Sainte Beuve (1804-69), de Nerval (1808-55) and Baudelaire (1821-67) – not a preferred medium for later poets. One of the reasons may be the rigidity arising from strict observance of the convention of the “alexandrine” or twelve-syllable line: while giving a certain grace, this quantitative approach to prosody provides only a limited range of rhythmic effects and so limits the expressiveness of the form.

Pierre De Marbeuf (1596-1645)

L'amour de mes penses, comme de son pinceau,
Vous peint à mon esprit, si je clos ma paupière,
Je vous vois en dormant, si je suis sans lumière,
Pour m'éclairer de nuit vous êtes mon flambeau.
Si je suis sur la terre, ou si je suis sur l'eau,

Vous me suivez sur terre, et dessus la rivière,
 Car je vous vois toujours et devant et derrière
 La croupe du cheval, la poupe du bateau.
 Encor que de mon corps le vôtre soit absent,
 A mon esprit toujours votre corps est présent :
 Concevez-vous cela, ma divine maîtresse ?
 Si pénétrer les corps par son agilité
 Est la propre action de la divinité,
 L'amour m'avait bien dit que vous étiez déesse.

Sainte Beuve - *A madame*

Ô laissez-vous aimer !... ce n'est pas un retour,
 Ce n'est pas un aveu que mon ardeur réclame ;
 Ce n'est pas de verser mon âme dans votre âme,
 Ni de vous enivrer des langueurs de l'amour ;
 Ce n'est pas d'enlacer en mes bras le contour
 De ces bras, de ce sein ; d'embraser de ma flamme
 Ces lèvres de corail si fraîches ; non, madame,
 Mon feu pour vous est pur, aussi pur que le jour.
 Mais seulement, le soir, vous parler à la fête,
 Et tout bas, bien longtemps, vers vous penchant la tête,
 Murmurer de ces riens qui vous savent charmer ;
 Voir vos yeux indulgents plus mollement reluire ;
 Puis prendre votre main, et, courant, vous conduire
 A la danse légère... ô laissez-vous aimer !

Gérard de Nerval - *Vers dorés*

Homme ! libre penseur - te crois-tu seul pensant
 Dans ce monde où la vie éclate en toute chose :
 Des forces que tu tiens ta liberté dispose,
 Mais de tous tes conseils l'univers est absent.
 Respecte dans la bête un esprit agissant : ...
 Chaque fleur est une âme à la Nature éclore ;
 Un mystère d'amour dans le métal repose :
 "Tout est sensible ! " - Et tout sur ton être est puissant !
 Crains dans le mur aveugle un regard qui t'épie
 A la matière même un verbe est attaché ...
 Ne la fais pas servir à quelque usage impie !
 Souvent dans l'être obscur habite un Dieu caché ;
 Et comme un oeil naissant couvert par ses paupières,
 Un pur esprit s'accroît sous l'écorce des pierres !

* * * *

Magic Casements

Alexander Pope (1688-1744) gave clear instructions for designers of magic casements:

True ease in writing comes from art, not chance,
 As those move easiest who have learned to dance.
 'Tis not enough no harshness gives offence,
 The sound must seem an echo to the sense:
 Soft is the strain when Zephyr gently blows,

And the smooth stream in smoother numbers flows;
 But when loud surges lash the sounding shore,
 The hoarse, rough verse should like the torrent roar;
 When Ajax strives some rock's vast weight to throw,
 The line too labours, and the words move slow;
 Not so, when swift Camilla scours the plain,
 Flies o'er the unbending corn, and skims along the main.
 Hear how 'Timotheus' varied lays surprise,
 And bid alternate passions fall and rise!

From 'The Princess' (Alfred, Lord Tennyson 1809-92)

For Love is of the valley, come thou down
 And find him; by the happy threshold, he,
 Or hand in hand with Plenty in the maize,
 Or red with spiced purple of the vats,
 Or foxlike in the vine; nor cares to walk
 With Death and Morning on the silver horns,
 Nor wilt thou snare him in the white ravine,
 Nor find him dropt upon the firths of ice,
 That huddling slant in furrow-cloven falls
 To roll the torrent out of dusky doors:
 But follow; let the torrent dance thee down
 To find him in the valley; let the wild
 Lean-headed Eagles yelp alone, and leave
 The monstrous ledges there to slope, and spill
 Their thousand wreaths of dangling water-smoke,
 That like a broken purpose waste in air;
 So waste not thou; but come; for all the vales
 Await thee; azure pillars of the hearth
 Arise to thee; the children call, and I
 Thy shepherd pipe, and sweet is every sound,
 Sweeter thy voice, but every sound is sweet;
 Myriads of rivulets hurrying thro' the lawn,
 The moan of doves in immemorial elms,
 And murmuring of innumerable bees.

La mort des amants (Charles Baudelaire 1821-67)

Nous aurons des lits pleins d'odeurs légères,
 Des divans profonds comme des tombeaux,
 Et d'étranges fleurs sur des étagères,
 Ecloses pour nous sous des cieus plus beaux.
 Usant à l'envi leurs chaleurs dernières,
 Nos deux coeurs seront deux vastes flambeaux,
 Qui réfléchiront leurs doubles lumières
 Dans nos deux esprits, ces miroirs jumeaux.
 Un soir fait de rose et de bleu mystique,
 Nous échangerons un éclair unique,
 Comme un long sanglot, tout chargé d'adieux ;
 Et plus tard un Ange, entr'ouvrant les portes,
 Viendra ranimer, fidèle et joyeux,
 Les miroirs ternis et les flammes mortes.

Funerei Flores (*Laurent Tailbade 1854-1919*)

Les nostalgiques citronniers aux feuilles blêmes
S'étiolent et leurs parfums, avec ennui,
Meurent dans le jardin peuplé de chrysanthèmes.
Pour la dernière fois le soleil tiède à lui.
Soir des morts ! Glas chargé de pleurs et d'anathèmes :
Le Souvenir s'éveille et reprend, aujourd'hui,
En sourdine, les vieux, les adorables thèmes
Des renouveaux lointains et du bonheur enfui.
Le Souvenir marmonne à voix basse. Une cloche
Funéraire, dans le ciel gris où s'effiloche
Maint lambeau d'occident fascé de pourpre et d'or.
Et c'est le crépuscule automnal des années
Que d'un encens trop vain fait resplendir encor
La mémoration des corolles fanées.

Sea Fever (*John Masefield 1878-1967*)

I must go down to the seas again,
to the lonely sea and the sky,
And all I ask is a tall ship
and a star to steer her by,
And the wheel's kick and the wind's song
and the white sail's shaking,
And a grey mist on the sea's face
and a grey dawn breaking.

I must go down to the seas again,
for the call of the running tide
Is a wild call and a clear call
that may not be denied;
And all I ask is a windy day
with the white clouds flying,
And the flung spray and the blown spume,
and the sea-gulls crying.

I must go down to the seas again
to the vagrant gypsy life,
To the gull's way and the whale's way
where the wind's like a whetted knife;
And all I ask is a merry yarn
from a laughing fellow rover,
And quiet sleep and a sweet dream
when the long trick's over.¹⁹

* * * *

The Washington Post has a regular competition ("Style invitational") that from time to time produces real gems. One such competition asked readers to take any word from the dictionary, alter it by adding, subtracting, or changing one letter, and supply a new

definition. Here are some winners:

Intaxication: Euphoria at getting a tax refund, which lasts until you realize it was your money to start with.

Foreploy: Any misrepresentation about yourself for the purpose of getting laid.

Giraffiti: Vandalism spray-painted very, very high.

Sarchasm: The gulf between the author of sarcastic wit and the person who doesn't get it.

Inoculate: To take coffee intravenously when you are running late.

Hipatitis: Terminal coolness.

Osteopornosis: A degenerate disease.

Glibido: All talk and no action.

Dopeler effect: The tendency of stupid ideas to seem smarter when they come at you rapidly.

Another challenged readers to come up with new terminology - winners were:

Backward somersaults: Winterpeppers

A new exercise machine that rubs out fat behinds: The Ass-assin

A stage name for a fat female vocalist who sings only to cello accompaniment: Mama Yo

* * * *

Not many modern poets attempted the sonnet, yet, when they did, it resulted in some of their best poetry.

She is as in a field a silken tent
At midday when a sunny summer breeze
Has dried the dew and all its ropes relent,
So that in guys it gently sways at ease
And its supporting central cedar pole,
That is its pinnacle to heavenward
And signifies the sureness of the soul,
Seems to owe naught to any single cord,
But strictly held by none, is loosely bound
By countless silken ties of love and thought
To everything on earth the compass round,
And only by one's going slightly taught
 In the capriciousness of summer air
 Is of the slightest bondage made aware.
Robert Frost 1874-1963

Our love has grown too strong for this tight place,
It strains convention's bounds and bursts the seams.
Small minds now denigrate, begrudge us space,
Feed rumour's mill with idle half-truths, dreams,
Such as are made by those whose own dreams lie
In half-remembrance, shattered, perjured, stale.
Their withered love they would with our love try
And, jealous, find comparison is pale.
Our love is like the Polar Star, fixed, sure -
Our firmament's firm point, it guides our way.
Now hid, our love shines with a light so pure
It would, revealed, turn darkest night to day.

¹⁹ With thanks to Margaret Thirsk for reminding me of this stirring poem.

Forget malicious gossip: lie with me.
This secret, our strength's source, no day shall see.

“next to of course god america i
love you land of the pilgrims” and so forth “oh
say can you see by the dawn's early my
country 'tis of centuries come and go
and are no more what of it we should worry
in every language even deafanddumb
thy sons acclaim your glorious name by gorrry
by jingo by gee by gosh by gum
why talk of beauty what could be more beaut-
iful than these heroic happy dead
who rushed like lions to the roaring slaughter
they did not stop to think they died instead
then shall the voice of liberty be mute?”
He spoke. And drank rapidly a glass of water
e e cummings 1894-1962

Not only marble, but the plastic toys
From cornflake packets will outlive this rhyme:
I can't immortalize you, love – our joys
Will lie unnoticed in the vault of time.
When Mrs. Thatcher has been cast in bronze
And her administration is a page
In some O-level text-book, when the dons
Have analysed the story of our age,
When travel firms sell tours of outer space
And aeroplanes take off without a sound
And Tulse Hill has become a trendy place
And Upper Norwood's on the underground
Your beauty and my name will be forgotten –
My love is true, but all my verse is rotten.
Wendy Cope 1945- from Strugnell's Sonnets

* * * *

Wit and wisdom – Oscar Wilde

The pure and simple truth is rarely pure and never simple.
Young men want to be faithful and are not; old men want to be faithless and cannot.
Always forgive your enemies; nothing annoys them so much.
Ah! don't say that you agree with me. When people agree with me I always feel that I must be wrong.
Only dull people are brilliant at breakfast.
I often take exercise. Why, only yesterday I had breakfast in bed.
Of course I have played outdoor games. I once played dominoes in an open air café in Paris.
Oh, I'm so glad you've come. There are a hundred things I want not to say to you.
Work is the curse of the drinking classes.
I can resist everything except temptation.
I must decline your invitation owing to an engagement which I am about to make.
Niagara Falls is the bride's second great disappointment.

I sometimes think that God in creating man somewhat overestimated his ability.
Mr. Whistler has always spelled “art” with a capital “T”²⁰.
When I was young I used to think that money was the most important thing in life. Now that I am old, I know it is.
Moderation is a fatal thing. Nothing succeeds like excess.
Imagination is a quality given a man to compensate him for what he is not, and a sense of humor was provided to console him for what he is.
The English country gentlemen galloping after a fox: the unspeakable in full pursuit of the uneatable.
Women inspire men to great undertakings and then distract us from carrying them out.
The play was a great success but the audience was a disaster.
When you are alone with Max Beerbohm he takes off his face and reveals his mask.
A true friend always stabs you in the front.
Those whom the gods love grow young.
Men always want to be a woman's first love. Women have a more subtle instinct: What they like is to be a man's last romance.

I find Wilde's poetry rather superficial – nevertheless, the following is probably his best – inspired, I would argue again, by the sonnet's “narrow room” (and also, perhaps, because it was one of the rare occasions when Wilde allowed genuine feeling to shine through his blasé mask).

On the Sale by Auction of Keats' Love Letters (*Oscar Wilde 1854-1900*)

These are the letters which Endymion wrote
To one he loved in secret, and apart.
And now the brawlers of the auction mart
Bargain and bid for each poor blotted note,
Ay! for each separate pulse of passion quote
The merchant's price. I think they love not art
Who break the crystal of a poet's heart
That small and sickly eyes may glare and gloat.
Is it not said that many years ago,
In a far Eastern town, some soldiers ran
With torches through the midnight, and began
To wrangle for mean raiment, and to throw
Dice for the garments of a wretched man,
Not knowing the God's wonder, or His woe?

* * * *

Doctors' notes on patients charts²¹

- Patient has chest pain if she lies on her left side for over a year.
- On the 2nd day the knee was better and on the 3rd day it disappeared completely.
- She had no rigors or shaking chills, but her husband says she was very hot in bed last night.
- The patient has been depressed ever since she began seeing me in 1993
- The patient is tearful and crying constantly. She also appears to be depressed.
- Discharge status: Alive but without permission.
- Healthy appearing decrepit 69 year-old male, mentally alert but forgetful.

²⁰ Albany Wiseman describes trendy art as art with a capital “F”.

²¹ With thanks to John Clark

- The patient refused an autopsy.
- The patient has no past history of suicides.
- Patient's past medical history has been remarkably insignificant with only a 40 pound weight gain in the past three days. While in the ER, she was examined, X-rated and sent home.
- Rectal exam revealed a normal size thyroid.
- Patient has left his white blood cells at another hospital.
- She stated that she had been constipated for most of her adult life, until she got a divorce.
- Both breasts are equal and reactive to light and accommodation
- I saw your patient today, who is still under our car for physical therapy.
- Skin: Somewhat pale but present.
- Patient had waffles for breakfast and anorexia for lunch.
- Exam of genitalia reveals that he *is* circus sized.
- The lab test indicated abnormal liver function.
- The pelvic examination will be done later on the floor
- The patient was to have a bowel resection. However, he took a job as a stockbroker instead.
- Patient has two teenage children, but no other abnormalities.
- Since she can't get pregnant with her husband, you might like to work her up.
- She is numb from her toes down.
- Between you and me, we ought to be able to get this lady pregnant.

* * * *

In *Christmas Pudding 2000*, I mentioned several “war poets”, but only gave extracts from their work. Their sonnets are their best poetry.

1914 (*Wilfred Owen 1893-1918*)

War broke: and now the Winter of the world
 With perishing great darkness closes in.
 The foul tornado, centred at Berlin,
 Is over all the width of Europe whirled,
 Rending the sails of progress. Rent or furled
 Are all Art's ensigns. Verse wails. Now begin
 Famines of thought and feeling. Love's wine's thin.
 The grain of human Autumn rots, down-hurled.
 For after Spring had bloomed in early Greece,
 And Summer blazed her glory out with Rome,
 An Autumn softly fell, a harvest home,
 A slow grand age, and rich with all increase.
 But now, for us, wild Winter, and the need
 Of sowings for new Spring, and blood for seed.

Anthem for Doomed Youth (*Wilfred Owen*)

What passing-bells for these who die as cattle?
 Only the monstrous anger of the guns.
 Only the stuttering rifles' rapid rattle
 Can patter out their hasty orisons.
 No mockeries now for them; no prayers nor bells;
 Nor any voice of mourning save the choirs,-

The shrill, demented choirs of wailing shells;
 And bugles calling for them from sad shires.
 What candles may be held to speed them all?
 Not in the hands of boys but in their eyes
 Shall shine the holy glimmers of good-byes.
 The pallor of girls' brows shall be their pall;
 Their flowers the tenderness of patient minds,
 And each slow dusk a drawing-down of blinds.

The Soldier (*Rupert Brooke 1887-1915*)

If I should die, think only this of me:
 That there's some corner of a foreign field
 That is for ever England. There shall be
 In that rich earth a richer dust concealed;
 A dust whom England bore, shaped, made aware,
 Gave, once, her flowers to love, her ways to roam,
 A body of England's, breathing English air,
 Washed by the rivers, blest by suns of home.
 And think, this heart, all evil shed away,
 A pulse in the eternal mind, no less
 Gives somewhere back the thoughts by England given;
 Her sights and sounds; dreams happy as her day;
 And laughter, learnt of friends; and gentleness,
 In hearts at peace, under an English heaven.

The Mother²² (*May Herschel-Clarke 1917*)

If you should die, think only this of me
 In that still quietness where is space for thought,
 Where parting, loss and bloodshed shall not be,
 And men may rest themselves and dream of nought:
 That in some place a mystic mile away
 One whom you loved has drained the bitter cup
 Till there is nought to drink; has faced the day
 Once more, and now, has raised the standard up.
 And think, my son, with eyes grown clear and dry
 She lives as though for ever in your sight,
 Loving the things *you* loved, with heart aglow
 For country, honour, truth, traditions high,
 --Proud that you paid their price. (And if some night
 Her heart should break--well, lad, you will not know.

February Afternoon (*Edward Thomas 1878-1917*)

Men heard this roar of parleying starlings, saw,
 A thousand years ago even as now,
 Black rooks with white gulls following the plough
 So that the first are last until a caw
 Commands that last are first again – a law
 Which as of old when one, like me, dreamed how
 A thousand years might dust lie on his brow

²² Written after reading the previous sonnet

Yet thus would birds do between hedge and shaw.
 Time swims before me, making as a day
 A thousand years, while the broad ploughland oak
 Roars mill-like and men strike and bear the stroke
 Of war as ever, audacious or resigned,
 And God sits still aloft in the array
 That we have wrought him, stone-deaf and stone-blind.

High Flight (*John Gillespie Magee, Jr. 1922-1941*²³)
 Oh! I have slipped the surly bonds of earth
 And danced the skies on laughter-silvered wings;
 Sunward I've climbed, and joined the tumbling mirth
 Of sun-split clouds and done a hundred things
 You have not dreamed of - wheeled and soared and swung
 High in the sunlit silence. Hov'ring there,
 I've chased the shouting wind along, and flung
 My eager craft through footless halls of air.
 Up, up, up the long, delirious burning blue
 I've topped the wind-swept heights with easy grace
 Where never Lark, or even Eagle flew -
 And, while with silent lifting mind I've trod
 The high untrespassed sanctity of space,
 Put out my hand and touched the face of God.

Which reminds me very much of *Ikarus* by Reinhard May:

Weisse Schluchten, Berg und Tal, Federwolken ohne Zahl,
 Fabelwesen ziehen vor den Fenstern vorbei.
 Schleier wie aus Engelshaar schmiegen sich beinahe greifbar
 Um die Flügellenden und reissen entzwei.

Manchmal frag' ich mich, was ist es eigentlich,
 Das mich drängt aufzusteigen und dort oben meine Kreise zu ziehen:
 Vielleicht um über alle Grenzen zu gehen,
 Vielleicht um über den Horizont hinauszusehen
 Und vielleicht um wie Ikarus
 Aus Gefangenschaft zu fliehen.

Hagelschauer prasseln grell und ein Böenkarussell
 Packt das Leitwerk hart mit unsichtbarer Hand.
 Wolkenspiel erstarrt zu Eis, Ziffern leuchten grünlich weiss,
 Weisen mir den Weg durchs Dunkel über Land.
 Manchmal frag' ich mich....

Städte in diesiger Sicht, Felder im Nachmittagslicht,
 Flüsse ziehen silberne Adern durch den Plan;

Schweben in seidiger Luft, im Landeanflug der Duft
 Von frischgemähtem Heu um die Asphaltbahn.
 Manchmal frag' ich mich....²⁴

Anna Akhmatova (1889-1966) was one of the great poets of the twentieth century. Like most creative artists of her generation in Russia, her life was tragically marked by Stalinist repression; the list of poets who suffered at Stalin's hands reads like an honour roll: Nikolai Gumilev (Akhmatova's husband), Alexander Blok, Marina Tsvetaeva, Osip Mandelstam and many more. I know no better book than Robert Conquest's *The Great Terror* (Macmillan 1968) for an understanding of what happened during these terrible years and intelligent speculation on why. Akhmatova's poems are wistful, sad and ironic: cameos, vignettes of an encounter, of a sudden perception linked to an otherwise insignificant or banal event, of some past experience "recalled in tranquillity" - and the emotions or deeper insights which these evoke in her. An excellent English translation by Judith Hemschemeyer of the complete poems was published by the Canongate Press, Edinburgh, 1994.

| | |
|--|---|
| Двадцать первое. Ночь. Понедельник. Очертания столицы во мгле. Сочинил же какой-то бездельник, Что бывает любовь на земле. И от лени или скуки Все поверили, так и живут: | Twenty-first. Night. Monday. Mist covers the skyline of the capital. Someone with nothing better to do wrote that there is love on earth. And from laziness or boredom everyone believed it and lives by it: |
|--|---|

| | |
|---|---|
| Ждут свиданий, боятся разлуки И любовные песни поют. Но иным открывается тайна, И почнет на них тишина ... Я на это наткнулась случайно, И с тех пор все как будто больно. ²⁵ | they yearn to be together, fear parting and sing love songs. But the secret is being revealed to others, and a stillness falls on them ... I came across it by accident and since then I seem to be a little unwell. |
|---|---|

²³ Although not of the Great War, this remarkable sonnet deserves its place along with the work of the "war poets". In 1939 the author earned a scholarship to Yale, but in September 1940 he enlisted in the Royal Canadian Air Force and was graduated as a pilot. He was sent to England for combat duty in July 1941. On December 11, 1941 his Spitfire collided with another plane over England and Magee, only 19 years of age, crashed to his death. His remains are buried in the churchyard cemetery at Scopwick, Lincolnshire.

²⁴ Reinhard May is one of the best contemporary poets in the German language – a lyricist in the tradition of Rainer Maria Rilke – as well as being one of the wittiest. (He writes good music too.)

²⁵ With thanks to Galina Alexandrovna Roubanova.

Gobfrey Shrdlu’s column²⁶
The violence [*in Paris*] followed a highly disciplined march called by the communist federation leader, General Du Travail. *Pretoria News*
Unfortunately the Prime Minister had left before the debate began. Otherwise he would have heard some caustic comments on his absence.
We apologize for the error in last week's paper in which we stated that Mr Arnold D..... was a defective in the police force. We meant, of course, that Mr D..... is a detective in the police farce. *Ely Standard*
Two Killed in Refugee Camp *Headline in Pakistani paper*
The United Nations Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Afghanistan, Kamal Hossain, called upon Taliban leader Mullah Mohammad Omar and the President of the Islamic State of Afghanistan, Burhanuddin Rabbani, for an immediate resumption of hostilities.... *IRIN, the UN humanitarian information unit based in Islamabad.*

Office correspondence is also a prolific source of unintended hilarity, although spell-checkers – among other things – are leading to increasingly humourless offices.

The process of evolution is a continuous process and it is still going on.
The underexpenditure is due to delays in the appointment of a quantity surveyor and design consultants
Michael B.... started life as a pilot in the Fleet Air Arm of the Royal Navy
She came here under the auspices of the University - I will revert more on the local reaction to her visit after my meeting with the rectum
After the strong earthquack all the staff are safe with damaged office building
As currently I am quite busy as you are aware PS is on leave, you should bare with me for slight delay.
The humanitarian programme is expected to be reduced significantly by the year 2001 to meet the needs of small pockets of the truly venerable
While the construction of the three classrooms was completed beyond schedule, the toilet block never took off the ground
I have also recruited a young man who speaks English on a temporary basis
We would like to take this opportunity once again to thank you for your unvaluable assistance
All disputes about this Agreement will be resolved by negotiation between the parties. If agreement cannot be reached, the parties will have recourse to meditation. *Draft contract*
Q: What should I do if I find a rock in a bag of potatoes? A: Simply return the rock to your grocer, who will give you the rock's weight in potatoes. *from a USDA booklet “How to Buy Potatoes” (I’m not quite sure how you do this in Tajikistan.)*
The U.S. Department of Agriculture prohibits discrimination in all its programs on the basis of race, color, national origin, gender, religion, age, disability, political beliefs, sexual orientation, and marital or family status. (Not all prohibited bases apply to all programs.) *Cover page of a USDA publication (A masterly combination of perfect political correctness and total absence of meaning)*
The Indian Customs Authorities require incoming passengers to declare all zip fasteners of foreign origin. *Air India customs form (The mind boggles at the probable methods of enforcement)*

* * * *

Oddities

Who wrote under the pseudonym *Emil Sinclair*?

²⁶ See *Christmas Pudding 1999*, where I referred to the collections of typographical errors published by Dennis Parsons and to his fictional character Gobfrey.

To whom did Durendal and Olifant belong?
Which American Presidents died on the 4th of July?

While researching the answers to last year’s “test” on the names of the Magi, I discovered the following “magic square”:

S A T O R
A R E P O
T E N E T
O P E R A
R O T A S

In ancient Rome this square could be found above doorways and on a variety of everyday objects such as utensils and drinking vessels. It was believed that the square had magical properties, and that displaying it would ward off evil spirits. The words roughly translate "The Creator (or Saviour) holds the working of the spheres in his hands". It also allows a number of anagrams (or mystical meanings):

PETRO ET REO PATET ROSA SARONA (Petrus, even though guilty, sees the opening of the saronic rose)

SAT ORARE - POTEN(TE)R ET OPERA(RE) - RA(TI)O T(U)A S(IT)
(Rules for Benedictine monks)

Another interpretation is that the square contains anagrams of the names of the Magi: ATOR, SATOR, PERATORAS

In addition, all the letters can be rearranged to form a cross:

P
A
T
E
R
R
O
S
T
E
R
P A T E R N O S T E R

The remaining two A's and O's can then be placed at the four ends of the cross to represent Alpha (the beginning) and Omega (the end). The letters can also be arranged into a prayer: 'Oro Te, Pater; oro Te, Pater; sanas' ('I pray to Thee, Father; I pray to Thee, Father; Thou healest').

In 1514, Albrecht Dürer made an engraving, *Melancholia*, which included a magic square, in which the sum of the numbers in each row and column is the same. In the bottom row the adjacent numbers 15 and 14 reveal the date of his engraving.

| | | | |
|----|----|----|----|
| 16 | 3 | 2 | 13 |
| 5 | 10 | 11 | 8 |
| 9 | 6 | 7 | 12 |
| 4 | 15 | 14 | 1 |

A student was interviewing psychiatric patients. He asked the first what was 3 x 3: "Friday" said the patient. The student then asked the next patient what was 5 x 5: after some reflection the patient replied "133". Almost giving up, the student then asked a third 4 x 4. "16", came the answer, quick as a flash. Now intrigued, the student asked the patient how he had worked it out. "Easy", he said, "I just took Friday away from 133".

111,111,111 x 111,111,111 = 12,345,678,987,654,321

The Centipede (*Mrs. Edmund Craster ?-1874*²⁷)

The Centipede was happy quite
Until the frog, for spite,
Said "Pray, which leg comes after which?"
Which wrought his mind to such a pitch,
He lay distracted in the ditch,
Considering how to run.
While lying in this dreadful plight,
A ray of sunshine caught his sight.
He dwelt upon its beauties long,
Till, breaking into happy song,
Unthinking, he began to run
And quite forgot the croaker's fun.

| | | |
|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| Her face | Her tongue | Her wit |
| so fair | so sweet | so sharp |
| first bent | then drew | then hit |
| mine eye | mine ear | my heart |
| Mine eye | Mine ear | My heart |
| to like | to learn | to love |
| her face | her tongue | her wit |
| doth lead | doth teach | doth move |
| Her face | Her tongue | Her wit |
| with beams | with sound | with art |
| doth blind | doth charm | doth knit |
| mine eye | mine ear | my heart |
| Mine eye | Mine ear | My heart |
| with life | with hope | with skill |
| her face | her tongue | her wit |
| doth feed | doth feast | doth fill |
| O face | O tongue | O wit |
| with frowns | with cheeks | with smart |
| wrong not | vex not | wound not |
| mine eye | mine ear | my heart |
| This eye | This ear | This heart |
| shall joy | shall yield | shall swear |
| her face | her tongue | her wit |
| to serve | to trust | to fear. |

Sir Arthur Gorges 1557-1625

À Philis (*Pierre De Marbeuf 1596-1645*)

Et la mer et l'amour ont l'amer pour partage,
Et la mer est amère, et l'amour est amer,
L'on s'abîme en l'amour aussi bien qu'en la mer,
Car la mer et l'amour ne sont point sans orage.
Celui qui craint les eaux, qu'il demeure au rivage,
Celui qui craint les maux qu'on souffre pour aimer,
Qu'il ne se laisse pas à l'amour enflammer,
Et tous deux ils seront sans hasard de naufrage.
La mère de l'amour eut la mer pour berceau,
Le feu sort de l'amour, sa mère sort de l'eau,
Mais l'eau contre ce feu ne peut fournir des armes.
Si l'eau pouvait éteindre un brasier amoureux,
Ton amour qui me brûle est si fort douloureux,
Que j'eusse éteint son feu de la mer de mes larmes.

I recently discovered the poetry of Lizette Woodworth Reese (1856-1935). I am ashamed that I had never noticed it before.

A Flower of Mullein

I am too near, too clear a thing for you,
A flower of mullein in a crack of wall,
The villagers half see, or not at all;
Part of the weather, like the wind or dew.
You love to pluck the different, and find
Stuff for your joy in cloudy loveliness;
You love to fumble at a door, and guess
At some strange happening that may wait behind.
Yet life is full of tricks, and it is plain,
That men drift back to some worn field or roof,
To grip at comfort in a room, a stair;
To warm themselves at some flower down a lane:
You, too, may long, grown tired of the aloof,
For the sweet surety of the common air.

The Second Wife

She knows, being woman, that for him she holds
The space kept for the second blossoming,
Unmixed with dreams, held tightly in the folds

²⁷ With thanks to Margery Tomalin

Of the accepted and long-proper thing –
 She, duly loved; and he, proud of her looks
 Shy of her wit. And of that other she knows
 She had a slim throat, a nice taste in books.
 And grew petunias in squat garden rows.
 Thus knowing all, she feels both safe and strange;
 Safe in his life, of which she has a share;
 Safe in her undisturbed, cool, equal place,
 In the sweet commonness that will not change;
 And strange, when, at the door, in the spring air,
 She hears him sigh, old Aprils in his face.

* * * *

A true story: A thermodynamics professor had written a take home exam for his graduate students. It had one question: "Is hell exothermic or endothermic? Support your answer with a proof." Most of the students wrote proofs of their beliefs using Boyle's Law or some variant. One student, however wrote the following:

First, we postulate that if souls exist, then they must have some mass. If they do, then a mole of souls can also have a mass. So, at what rate are souls moving into hell and at what rate are souls leaving? I think that we can safely assume that once a soul gets to hell, it will not leave. Therefore, no souls are leaving.

As for souls entering hell, lets look at the different religions that exist in the world today. Some of these religions state that if you are not a member of their religion, you will go to hell. Since, there are more than one of these religions and people do not belong to more than one religion, we can project that all people and all souls go to hell. With birth and death rates as they are, we can expect the number of souls in hell to increase exponentially.

Now, we look at the rate of change in volume in hell. Boyle's Law states that in order for the temperature and pressure in hell to stay the same, the ratio of the mass of souls and volume needs to stay constant. So, a) if hell is expanding at a slower rate than the rate at which souls enter hell, then the temperature and pressure in hell will increase until all hell breaks loose; b) if hell is expanding at a rate faster than the increase of souls in hell, then the temperature and pressure will drop until hell freezes over. So which is it?

If we accept the postulate given me by Therese Banyan during Freshman year, and take into account the fact that I still have not succeeded in having sexual relations with her, then b) cannot be true, and hell is exothermic.

The student got the only A.

* * * *

Finely observed description

L'automne des Canaries (*Marc-Antoine Girard De Saint-Amant 1594-1661*)
 Voici les seuls cotaux, voici les seuls vallons
 Où Bacchus et Pomone ont établi leur gloire;
 Jamais le riche honneur de ce beau territoire
 Ne ressentit l'effort des rudes aquilons.
 Les figues, les muscats, les pêches, les melons

Y couronnent ce dieu qui se délecte à boire
 Et les nobles palmiers, sacrés à la victoire,
 S'y courbent sous des fruits qu'au miel nous égalons.
 Les cannes au doux suc, non dans les marécages,
 Mais sur des flancs de roche, y forment des bocages
 Dont l'or plein d'ambrosie éclate et monte aux cieus.
 L'orange en même jour y murit et boutonne,
 Et durant tous les mois on peut voir en ces lieux
 Le printemps et l'été confondus en l'automne.

Noon (*John Clare 1793-1864*)

The mid day hour of twelve the clock counts oer
 A sultry stillness lulls the air asleep
 The very buzz of fly is heard no more
 Nor one faint wrinkle o'er the waters creep
 Like one large sheet of glass the pool does shine
 Reflecting in its face the burnt sun beam
 The very fish their sturting play decline
 Seeking the willow shadows side the stream
 And where the hawthorn branches o'er the pool
 The little bird forsaking song and nest
 Flutters on dripping twigs his limbs to cool
 And splashes in the stream his burning breast
 O free from thunder for a sudden shower
 To cherish nature in this noon day hour.

A Crocodile (*Thomas Lovell Beddoes 1803-1849*)

Hard by the liled Nile I saw
 A duskish river-dragon stretched along,
 The brown habergeon of his limbs enamelled
 With sanguine almandines and rainy pearl:
 And on his back there lay a young one sleeping,
 No bigger than a mouse; with eyes like beads,
 And a small fragment of its speckled egg
 Remaining on its harmless, pulpy snout;
 A thing to laugh at, as it gaped to catch
 The baulking, merry flies. In the iron jaws
 Of the great devil-beast, like a pale soul
 Fluttering in rocky hell, lightsomely flew
 A snowy troculus, with roseate beak
 Tearing the hairy leeches from his throat.

* * * *

In *Christmas Pudding 1999*, I included two fine poems by Frederick Goddard Tuckerman (1821-73) and expressed regret that so little of his poetry can be found in anthologies. I intend to remedy this forthwith.

Sometimes, when winding slow by brook and bower,
 Beating the idle grass,--of what avail,
 I ask, are these dim fancies, cares and fears?
 What though from every bank I drew a flower,--
 Bloodroot, king orchis, or the pearlwort pale,--

And set it in my verse with thoughtful tears?
 What would it count though I should sing my death
 And muse and mourn with as poetic breath
 As in damp garden walks the autumn gale
 Sighs o'er the fallen floriage? What avail
 Is the swan's voice if all the hearers fail?
 Or his great flight that no eye gathereth
 In the blending blue? And yet depending so,
 God were not God, whom knowledge cannot know.
Sonnet I

Not the round natural world, not the deep mind,
 The reconcilment holds: the blue abyss
 Collects it not; our arrows sink amiss
 And but in Him may we our import find.
 The agony to know, the grief, the bliss
 Of toil, is vain and vain: clots of the sod
 Gathered in heat and haste and flung behind
 To blind ourselves and others, what but this
 Still grasping dust and sowing toward the wind?
 No more thy meaning seek, thine anguish plead,
 But leaving straining thought and stammering word,
 Across the barren azure pass to God:
 Shooting the void in silence like a bird,
 A bird that shuts his wings for better speed.
Sonnet XXVIII

* * * *

Epigrams

He first deceased; she for a little tried
 To live without him, liked it not, and died.
Sir Henry Wotton 1568–1639 – Upon the death of Sir Andrew Morton's Wife

If true that notion, which but few contest,
 That, in the way of wit, short things are best,
 Then in good epigrams two virtues meet,
 For 'tis their glory to be short and sweet.
Anonymous

Here lie I, Martin Elginbrod.
 Have mercy on my soul, Lord God;
 As I would do, were I Lord God,
 And ye were Martin Elginbrod.
Anonymous

Most Gracious Queen we thee implore,
 To go away and sin no more,
 But if that effort be too great,
 To go away at any rate.

*Anonymous*²⁸

He took castle and towns; he cut short limbs and lives;
 He made orphans and widows of children and wives;
 This course many years he triumphantly ran,
 And did mischief enough to be called a great man.
Thomas Love Peacock 1785-1866

Wer einsam ist, der hat es gut,
 Weil keiner da, der ihm was tut.
Wilhelm Busch

When I am dead, I hope it may be said:
 "His sins were scarlet, but his books were read."
Hilaire Belloc

* * * *

Florbela Espanca (1894–1930) is virtually unknown outside her native Portugal²⁹. I know of no English translations of her works, although some were translated into Italian by Guido Batelli, an Italian professor at the University of Coimbra, and published in the 1930s. Florbela's poems are wild, sensual, erotic, full of tragic intuition – totally out of keeping with the *mores* of her day. She lived her short life as passionately as she wrote poetry: she married three times (for love) and ended her own life. It may therefore seem somewhat surprising that, in many of her most expressive works, she chose the sonnet form – perhaps she felt that only the tight structure and fixed certainties of the sonnet would allow her to express her passion without it dominating her art.

| Horas rubras | Fiery hours |
|---|---|
| Horas profundas, lentas e caladas, Feitas de beijos sensuais e ardentes, De noites de volúpia, noites quentes Onde há risos de virgens desmaiadas... | Deep, slow and silent hours Made of sensual burning kisses, On voluptuous nights, burning nights Carrying laughter of fainting virgins... |
| Oíço as olaías rindo desgrenhadas... Tombam astros em fogo, astros dementes, E do luar os beijos languescerentes São pedaços de prata plas estradas... | I hear the wind-blown Judas trees laughing ... Stars fall in fire, stars of madness, And, in the moonlight, languescent kisses Are pieces of silver on the streets ... |
| Os meus lábios são brancos como lagos... Os meus braços são leves como afagos... Vestiu-os o luar de sedas puras... | My lips are white as lakes... My arms are light as caresses, Dressed in the sheen of sheer silk... |

²⁸ Recorded in the diary of Lord Colchester (1757-1829). When Queen Caroline, consort of King George IV, was accused of adultery, one of her critics made a sardonic salute to some of her defenders: "God save the queen, and may all your wives be like her." During President Clinton's tribulations the verse was often quoted – almost exclusively by Republicans.

²⁹ I am grateful to Rafic Noordin for encouraging me to discover her works, and to Imtiaz Juma for help with the translation.

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|--|---|
| Sou chama e neve branca e misteriosa... E sou, talvez, na noite voluptuosa, Ó meu Poeta, o beijo que procuras! | I am burning flame and white mysterious snow... And I am, perhaps, this voluptuous night, O my Poet, the kiss that you seek! |
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Tips – enjoyed in 2001³⁰

Books

ABC of Reading, Ezra Pound; faber and faber – first published 1934 – paperback 1991

Rouge Brun – le mal du siècle, Thierry Wolton; JC Lattès 1999

The Mitrokhin Archive – the KGB in Europe and the West, Christopher Andrew and Vasili Mitrokhin; Allen Lane, The Penguin Press 1999

Wine

Pinot Noir 1997 élevé en fût de chêne – Charles-Henri Meylan, Bougy-Villars, Vaud

Pinot Blanc 1999 – Pierre Cretigny, Château de Crans, Vaud

Petite Syrah 1997 Combe d'Enfer – André Roduit, Fully, Valais

CDs

Mischa Maisky and Daris Hovora, *après un rêve* – Deutsche Grammophon 457 657-2

Pletnev live at Carnegie Hall – Deutsche Grammophon 471 157-2

Ensemble Kapsberger, Santiago de Murcia *Codex n. 4 Mexico c. 1730* – Astrée E8661

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Here are the answers to the “tests” included in previous editions:

- 1999:** I met a traveler from an antique land
Who said: Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the desert . . . Near them, on the sand,
Half sunk, a shattered visage lies, whose frown,
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,
The hand that mocked them, and the heart that fed.

And on the pedestal these words appear:
"My name is Ozymandias, king of kings:
Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!"
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch far away.
Percy Bysshe Shelley (Ozymandias, 1818)

Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego: cf *Book of Daniel* 3: 16-18

In Xanadu did Kubla Khan
A stately pleasure-dome decree:
Where Alph, the sacred river, ran
Through caverns measureless to man
Down to a sunless sea.
Samuel Taylor Coleridge (Kubla Khan, 1798)

- 2000:** The Moving Finger writes; and having writ,
Moves on: nor all thy Piety nor Wit
Shall lure it back to cancel half a line,
Nor all thy Tears wash out a Word of it.
Edward FitzGerald's translation of the Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam

The writing on the wall – at Belshazzar's feast: *Mene Mene Tekel Upharsin* (Daniel 5:25). These Aramaic words may be translated literally as, “It has been counted and counted, weighed and divided.” Daniel interpreted this to mean that the king's deeds had been weighed and found deficient and that his kingdom would therefore be divided.

Gaspar, Melchior and Balthazar; Araphon, Hurmon and Tachshesh; Magaloth, Galgalath and Saracin; and Ator, Sator and Peratoras – were the names given to the Magi in, respectively, Greek, Syriac, Hebrew and Latin (also Appelius, Amerius, and Damascus).

³⁰ With thanks to, *inter alia*, Dennis Thompson and Denise Conta