They Also Surf Who Only Stand and Wade

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When it came time for me to present my first paper to this discriminating body, I had not been informed--though a more astute person would probably have inferred--that the custom of the group required that the tiles of projected papers should be enigmatic. Thus I announced in advance that I planned to make some observations on the views of Alfred North Whitehead--views which seemed to have been largely forgotten in recent decades despite what has always seemed to me their great importance. (There are intellectual fashions, just as there are fashions in dress, in advertising, and in prevailing battles over competing slogans and stereotypes.) I suspect that announcing the topic may have kept some members away, but there was at least one, Al Jonsen, who said that he made an effort to attend because of his interest in Whitehead. So all was not lost. However, having had the custom explained to me, and being by nature respectful of traditions, when it next came my turn to present a paper, I elected to choose a title sufficiently enigmatic to puzzle even the shrewdist reader or hearer. Caveat lector, caveat auditor, as the Roman poet might have said but didn't (as far as I know). It turned out that my present title was so thoroughly enigmatic that it was a puzzle to me also. It had, I thought, a certain air of mystery, that might prompt curiosity, but it led in no particular direction and I had some difficulty in deciding what use to make of it. I finally concluded that since we had had several interesting essays about literary giants--there was Frank Sloss's excellent discussion of Stevenson, Steinbeck and Stegner, who shared a common nominal alliteration, and there was last month Willard Hamilton's sympathetic and eloquent presentation on T.S. Eliot--some attention might be paid to the lesser lights of literature, or to those cases when the great writers slipped off their pedestals and committed (as it were) an artistic double-fault. After all, we are urged these days to distrust "elitism" and "meritocracy", since they imply standards of discriminatig taste and superior performace; in fairness, we should obviously give some attention to less successful writers. Then, too, even Homer nods, and even the greatest poets have their off days or off moments. It was such considerations as these

led me to reexamine an invaluable volume, originally published more than fifty years ago and once (at least) reprinted, but now, I think, largely forgotten, I refer to namely The Stuffed Owl, An Anthology of Bad Verse, compiled and edited by D.B. Wyndham Lewis and Charles Less, enlightened (in the edition of 1962) with eight cartoons by Max Beerbohm, including not only caricatures of some of the great but also a touching sketch entitled "The Minor Poet and His Muse," (p. 262) which appears suggestively on the page facing the Index of Authors. If you don't know the book, I commend it to your attention, though copies may be hard to find. The selections begin with the early 17th century, with Cowley and Dryden and their contemporaries, and run through the 19th and the period of Tennyson, omitting earlier writers for lack of space, and omitting contemporary 20th century writers partly on grounds of what the editors call "delicacy" and partly because the coming of "free verse" makes canons of discrimination between good and bad verse hard to find and hard to apply. There is also another limitation that should be mentioned. In their Preface, the editors distinguish between Good Bad Verse and Bad Bad Verse, choosing to restrict their selection to the former. Their observations on the difference are worth quoting:

"...Bad Verse has its canons, like Good Verse. There is bad Bad Verse and good Bad Verse....The field of bad Bad Verse is vast, and confusing in its tropical luxuriance...(They go on to describe some types, and indicate their regret at having to leave out so vast a segment of the total product.)...good Bad verse is grammatical, it is constructed according to the Rubrics, its rhythms, rimes and metres are impeccable. A rough illustration will readily occur. Bad Bad Verse is a strong but inexperienced female child doggedly attacking Debussy's Fetes in a remote provincial suburb on a hire-payment pianoforte from the Swiftsure Furnishing Stores. Good Bad Verse is Rummel or Lamond executing Warblings at Eve at Queen's Hall on a Bechstein concert-grand." (p. ix)

Snobbish, you may say. Possibly, but the editors go on to point out that they do not intend by this description to recommend that we despise or patronise good Bad Verse. (Remember that their metaphor is designed to distinguish between two kinds of Bad Verse and that playing Warblings at Eve at Queen's Hall (or Carnegie or Davies Hall) on a Bechstein grand piano (or a Steinway or perhaps a Baldwin) is by them commended, not dismissed. It has, they go on to say, a "certain eerie, supernal beauty comparable in its accidents with the beauty of Good Verse." After all, they chose to make a compilation of it for our profit and enjoyment. It can, they add, be "devilish pleasing" (p. x)

so the real question is why it is good Bad Verse rather than Good Verse. There is, they say, no lack of craftmanship. It is rather that in some subtle way the purported loftiness of manner proves to be misplaced; the project comes a cropper, like an eminent Finacier dressed with care slipping on a banana peel. Thus, they continue, "it is generally the most distinguished poets who provide the nicest Bad Verse...The more eminent the poet, the more imposing the glissade, the more shattering the bump below." They quote George Crabbe's couplet,

> And I was asked and authoriz'd to go
> To seek the firm of Clutterbuck and Co,
>
> (From Tales of the Hall: The Elder Brother)

and the great Samuel Johnson, from his poem, London, A Poem in Imitation of the Third Satire of Juvenal:

> Has Heaven reserv'd in pity to the poor
> No pathless waste, or undiscovered shore?
> No secret island in the boundless Main?
> No peaceful desert, yet unclaimed by Spain?
> Forgive my transports on a theme like this,
> I cannot bear a French metropolis....

And from the inspired Wordworth they select an opening line,

> "Spade! with which Wilkinson hath tilled his lands

and from his poem, "Peter Bell, these three lines:

> Once more the Ass, with motion dull,
> Upon the pivot of his skull
> Turned round his long left ear.

These last are from the same pen that could write such inspired and familiar lines as as those which the name of Wordsworth normally suggests,

> The world is too much with us; late and soon
> Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers:
> Little we see in Nature that is ours;
> We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon;...

Such examples of good Bad Verse represent, as it were, the pratfalls of the great, cases like those where Willie Mays dropped a fly ball attracting attention because the occurrence was unexpected. Most of the best known poets (from the periods covered) are represented in the collection, along with a few Americans, such as Poe and Longfellow.

But there are is another class of writers whose works are found

in the collection, these being writers of considerable earnestness, of limited but definite dexterity in versification, and lacking in any sense of the ridiculous. Some of them are worth attention.

One such is Nahum Tate, (1652-1715), known today for his hymn, "While shepherds watched their flocks by night/ All seated on the ground." He was made Poet Laureate in 1692, and among other accomplishments wrote a special version of Shakespeare's King Lear in which the Fool was left out and Cordelia finally married Edgar. His version was accepted for many years, as a supposed improvement on Shakespeare's original; even Dr. Johnson thought it superior on moral grounds, since virtue was rewarded and vice was punished. In his Preface to King Lear, Johnson wrote,

> "In the presebt case, the publick has decided. Cordelia, from the time of Tate, has always retired with victory and felicity. And, if my sensations could add anything to the general suffrage, I might relate that I was many years ago so shocked by Cordelia's death, that I know not whether I ever endured to read again the last scenes of the play till I understook to revise them as an editor."

But Pope was less kind to Nahum Tate, on literary grounds.

> And he who now to Sense,and now to Nonsense leaning
> Means not, but blunders round about a Meaning,
> And he whose Fustian's so sublimely bad,
> It is not Poetry, but Prose run mad:
> All these my modest Satire bade translate,
> And own 'd that nine such Poets made a TATE."

Thus Tate qualifies as a writer of good Bad Verse and is included in the Anthology, with an Ode upon the New Year (1693), which begins,

> The happy, happy year is born,
> That wonders shall disclose;
> That conquest with fix'd laurels shall adorn,
> And give our lab'ring Hercules repose...

This, be it noted, is Tate at his heavy and pedestrian best. But he was once taken seriously. Indeed, I think his version of King Lear was generally used until well into the 19th century, when Shakespeare's original version was restored to favor.

Another interesting figure who turns up in this Anthology is a 19th century poet named Edward Edwin Foot, about whom I can discover nothing except that he published a volume of poems in 1867, the publication being sponsored by the head of the British Customs Service, in which Foot held a position. His chief claim to fame is that he appended footnotes to his poems, to make the meaning clear to the average reader. One example will serve,

Disaster at Sea

The captain scans the ruffled zone[1]
And heeds the wind's increasing scope;
He knows full well, and reckons on
His seamanship, but God's his hope...;

1/ A figurative expression, intended by the Author to signify the horizon

The editors of the Anthology comment that "Mr Foot...has a claim possibly on lovers of verse but certainly on lovers of the footnote, which may have been named after him." I question this particular attribution, yet the point could be important. It will be called that Whitehead once remarked that all of Western Philosophy consists of a series of footnotes to Plato. This is often taken as a tribute to Plato, but I suggest that it stands also as a tribute to the inventor of the footnote, without which modern academic scholarship, including philosophy along with all other fields, would stand helpless. To pursue the invention of the footnote, and to classify its many forms, is a task on which I once began, but never successfully completed. I can report, however, that if Mr. Foot introduced the use of footnotes to explicate poetic meanings, the device itself was not bf his first contriving, despite the coicidence of name. I might add that T.S. Eliot appended Notes to The Waste Land in 1922, though with more discrimination and less ostentation, since these were added as an appendix and were not, strictly speaking footnotes at all. Thus Mr. Foot has his own distinctive niche in the pantheon of peotry.

Another arresting figure represented by several selections in the Anthology is Julia Moore (1847-1920), now forgotten but once known as "The Sweet Singer of Michigan"; her works had wide publicity in the 1870's and ran through many editions, though her vogue was not lasting. Mark Twain is said to have admiited much later that the works of Julia Moore had given him much joy. If we examine them, we can perhaps see why. Here are a few:

The Ashtabula Disaster

Have you heard of the dreadful fate
Of Mr. P.P. Bliss and wife?
Of their death I will relate,
And also others lost their life;
Ashtabula Bridge disaster,
Where so many people died
Without a thought that destruction
Would plunge them 'neath the wheel of tide.

Chorus
Swiftly passed the engine's call,
Hastening souls on to death,

Warning not one of them all;
It brought despair right and left.

The elevated tone continues, with equal eloquence, for several verses. But if she admired P.P. Bliss, she was more critical about Lord Byron:

Lord Byron's Life

"Lord Byron" was an Englishman
A poet I believe,
His first works in old England
Was poorly received.
Perhaps it was "Lord Byron's" fault
And perhaps it was not.
His life was full of misfortunes,
Ah, strange was his lot.

The character of "Lord Byron"
Was of low degree,
Caused by his reckless conduct,
And bad company.
He sprang from an ancient house,
Noble but poor, indeed.
His career on earth, was marred
By his own misdeeds.

There are five more stanzas, in which the poet tried to do justice to the complex character of her subject. Here is one:

Yet at the age of 24
"Lord Byron" then had gained
The highest, highest pinnacle
Of literary fame.
Ah, he had such violent passions
They was beyond his control,
Yet the public with its justice
Sometimes would him extol.

And the final conclusion of his tragic life:

He had joined the Grecian Army
This man of delicate frame;
And there he died in a distant land,
And left on earth his fame.
"Lord Byron's" age was 36 years,
Then closed the sad career
Of the most celebrated "Englishman"
Of the nineteenth century.

It should be noted that the name, Lord Byron, is consistently put in quotation marks, as if our authoress considered it a pseudonym of some sort, and the word Englishman is similarly treated. I don't know the reasons; I expect it reflects her sense of the deep human conflict between appearance and reality, virtue and vice, triumph and tragedy. We can perhaps see why her work gave such joy to Mark

Twain and other humorists like Bill Nye, whose sardonic comments the Sweet Singer took very seriously as expressions of admiration. She evidently took her work and her poetic mission very seriously indeed.

Rab Minto has called attention to another writer of similar gifts and similar style, whose works do not appear in this Anthology though they seem to have every qualification. This is William McGonegall, also known as "the great McGonegall", a Scottish writer of roughly the same period, who wrote in much the same style about very similar subjects, giving similar satisfaction to his public. Why he got omitted is not clear. But this neglect was made up by a new edition of his works published in 1954, to which I invite your attention.

You will have noted that such work as that of Julia Moore, the Sweet Singer of Michigan, and that of the Great McGonegall, may serve to call in question the distinction between good Bad Verse and bad Bad Verse as made by the compliers of The Stuffed Owl, to which I referred earlier. We seem to have not only the missteps of the great, and the earnest fumblings of their less inspired imitators, which fall into the category of good Bad Verse, but also work which is so very bad on all counts that it acquires a certain special distinction, exerting a certain fascination. By transcending any ordinary categories of badness, poems of this sort achieve a certain unique merit, and thus may be rated as examples of good Bad Verse. At least this seems to be the way the compilers of the Anthology have applied their classification. Yet doubts remain.

I mentioned earlier Max Beerbohm's cartoon depicting "The Minor Poet and his Muse." What if the poet knows that his particular muse is not one of the sacred Nine but only a poor relation, a distant cousin perhaps, or perhaps a pretender? Here you have the minor poet deliberately serving what he knows to be a Minor Muse. Where do we place him? How do we classify his work? Are we to call it good Bad Verse or bad Bad Verse? I do not know. But I thought that it might be well, as a start, to provide a specimen for consideration. I have designed the specimen to tie in with the title of this paper. And I respectfully submit it for your consideration.

I would add one caveat. There is no intention here to belittle one of the greatest sonnets in the Englih language, but rather to draw a contrast. As Chesterton once remarked, only the person who is truly devout can treat religion lightly. So here.

The Minor Poet on His Myopia

When I consider how my life is spent
  Through days and nights, in this dark world and wide,
  And those small Talents which a leaf could hide--
I wonder what they were and where they went,
And if they served His purposes who sent
  Them down to my account, thus to provide
  Slight sparks that dimly flamed and quickly died
Unseemly aspirations to prevent.

A cautious listener to the Ocean's din,
  The minor poet serves his minor muse
  With modest talents, modestly displayed;
He watches others ride the breakers in,
  Content such daring ventures to refuse:
  They also surf who only stand and wade.

--P.H.Rhinelander

The Major Poet On His Blindness

When I consider how my light is spent,
  E're half my days, in this dark world and wide,
  And that one Talent which is death to hide,
  Lodg'd 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 deny'd,
  I fondly ask: But patience to prevent
That murmur, soon replies, God doth not need
  Either man's work or his own gifts, who best
  Bear his mild yoak, 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.

--John Milton