THE TWO ROOMS:
HUMOR IN MODERN AMERICAN VERSE*

REED WHITTEMORE

W. H. Auden has some lines in Letters from Iceland that will serve as an epigraph here:
  Light verse, poor girl, is under a sad weather;
  Except by Milne and persons of that kind
  She’s treated as démodé altogether.

Auden, I should point out, was talking about the English, not the American poetic scene in these lines; he was writing them in 1936 or 1937 when England was still his native land and when he was himself writing a good deal of pretty fine “light verse” to compensate, as it were, for the British failing. His emigration to this country and subsequent worldly ascension coincided, loosely, with his conversion to pontification. I should add that he remains, even in his new and weighty cultural role, one of the few really witty poets in our textbooks. But the Auden of Letters from Iceland is no more, and America could never even lay claim to Letters from Iceland except by courtesy of Random House.

I don’t want to be scholarly here — scholarship always takes more than eighteen minutes — and so I’ll not undertake to define the phrase, “light verse,”contenting myself with the observation that Byron and Pope, as well as Ogden Nash and Richard Armour, qualify as practitioners in some quarters, and that indeed Auden dedicated his verse in Letters from Iceland to Byron. I merely ask that you think of the phrase in such grand terms as you can muster for this occasion — satiric verse, or mock-heroic verse perhaps — since the grand terms are the terms I am thinking in when I say that we have very little in this country.

There is, of course, the New Yorker. I have another and much longer speech about the New Yorker in which I discover that the New Yorker prints two kinds of verse chosen, apparently, in different rooms. The editors in one room choose Ogden Nash or Phyllis McGinley or, more recently, John Updike, while the editors in the other room choose good, high-minded Brooks-and-Warren organisms suitable for dissection in any classroom in the land. But I don’t want to go into the New Yorker here, its virtues and deficiencies. Let it be sufficient to say of it that

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I think its light verse is better than its heavy verse, but that the light verse isn't much either. I mention the *New Yorker* largely to introduce the notion of two distinct rooms, one for light and one for heavy verse, and to assert that this division seems rather characteristic of modern American verse in general. I think the sharpness of this division is unfortunate, for both parties. It commits Ogden Nash to perpetual Ogden Nash, and it commits our loftier poets to the cold, forbidding countries above the treeline — or, to recall my original metaphor, to a stone room with stone benches and a stone heart.

What is the cause of such a division? There are probably several causes; certainly one can produce a number of difficult-to-sustain hypotheses to explain it. For example, one might say — and I *did* say in that longer speech I am not going to read you — that

in general Americans seem to have some nasty scruples about mixing business and pleasure. Serious is serious and funny is funny, work is work and play is play; and if somebody comes along and starts to mix these neat categories, then there's trouble.

Or I think one could argue that the cause of the division may be traced more immediately to the low state of verse in our time — traced, that is, to the sense our poets have that they are trying to defend the whole of the culture with popguns and must therefore at least make large noises. For surely an artist without confidence in the art itself is ill-equipped to do his job with the offhand, careless grace always present in great satire. Or, for a second hypothesis, one could argue that cleverness, verbal cleverness, has been appropriated in our country lock, stock and barrel by the *merely* clever; in Pope's terms the willings have stolen the goods from the wits and used them so hard that the wits are left with nothing not somehow tarnished or tainted. — I'm thinking of the mock heroics and verbal playfulness of the advertisers, the antics of our cartoonists and comedians, and so on. I am also thinking of some of the light verse to be found in places like the *Saturday Evening Post*, and of the air of cuteness which pervades comic commercial literature in general.

Probably all of these hypotheses have a certain validity, but as they are big, social, cultural things I'll leave them to the higher minds than mine here and concentrate for the rest of my time on the literary effects — that is, the effects on the writings of the poets themselves — of discovering that it is conventional and desirable to choose *between* the two rooms rather than trying to live in both of them. My primary concern (despite my ap-
parent subject: humor) is with poets who choose the serious room, since we almost all do. That is the stony room I have mentioned.

It is also a very formal room, but not formal in predictable, traditional ways. Most of our poets have had intensive indoctrination in avoiding certain traditional formalities, and in trying to preserve instead, in their poetry, the language of the living, the language of common speech, and in avoiding accordingly the various poetic effects Pound and others conducted their great campaigns against — inversions, straddled adjectives, a metronomic beat, and so on. Furthermore, rhyme is not very popular now either, so that even when it is used it is apt to be used unobtrusively, since the last thing a poet wants to be accused of, unless he is Ogden Nash, is of being “rhyme-led.” But despite this indoctrination — which you would think would lead to a reasonably easy, colloquial poetic language — the dominant quality in the rhetoric of most of our poets, even some very good poets, seems to me to be a certain stiffness of manner, a stiffness which is if anything accentuated rather than diminished by the poets’ attempts to be colloquial, up-to-date. Thus the stiffness of which I speak may be as readily discovered in the works of, say, a beat poet as a professor-type poet. For what causes the trouble is the double obligation — shared by the beats and the professors — to produce a poetry which is prosaic and at the same time somehow elevated above the prosaic. I will be sparing of examples, but I hope the two I give here will at least be suggestive of what I mean. First, here is a passage from a poem by Philip Booth:

*The Tower*

Strangers ask
always, how tall
it is. Taller,
the natives say,

than any other.

Watching it sway,
slightly, in a brisk
wind, you believe
them and feel,
well, smaller

than you once
did, or would have,

even had they woken
somebody’s father,

who remembers
every specification,

they say, having fought

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against this location,
in the last elections
before it was built . . .

That is the first part of a poem which goes on for several pages in the same form. Hearing me read it you may or may not get a sense of the particular formal property of the poem I find disturbing, that is, the line divisions; for I am sure that Mr. Booth would not want me to pause at the end of each line as I read it (try a few lines, for the effect). And yet, if he does not, the question arises, why does he divide the lines as he does at all? Why does he make it harder for us to discover the places for pauses rather than trying to help us with them? I don’t know how he would answer that question, but I suspect that he would evade it and say that the form served the purpose of making the reader look at the words in a new way. I agree that the form does this, though I doubt that the novelty is worth it. I think also that he gets a kind of contrapuntal effect by the form, especially if you look at the poem on the page rather than hearing it, the effect of the sentence going ahead under its own steam while the verse form in which the sentence is immersed moves, as it were, independently of the sentence.

Secondly, here is a passage from a poem by Lawrence Ferlinghetti. I think it is a tribute to William Carlos Williams, though that’s my own unresearched guess:

He is one of the prophets come back
He is one of the wiggy prophets come back
He had a beard in the Old Testament
   but shaved it off in Paterson
He has a microphone around his neck
at a poetry reading
   and he is more than one poet
   and he is an old man perpetually writing a poem
   about an old man
   whose every third thought is Death
   and who is writing a poem
   about an old man
   whose every third thought is Death
   and who is writing a poem
like the picture on a Quaker Oats box
   that shows a figure holding up a box
   upon which is a picture of a figure
   holding up a box
   and the figure smaller and smaller
   and further away each time
   a picture of shrinking reality itself . . .

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Now in this form the line units work with rather than against
the sense divisions and the natural breath pauses, so that the
stiffness — and I think there is stiffness — arises from a dif-
ference source (I should add that I rather like the poem). Fer-
inghetti is trying, and with some success, to get a kind of chant
going, to achieve, that is, a certain elevation of tone by certain
repeated phrases, certain rhetorical sequences (he, he, he; and,
and, and), and also, I think, by the omissions of any punctua-
tion and by the curious staggering of the lines on the page —
minor formal tricks designed, I think, to call attention to the
fact that this is a poem and a formal occasion. At the same time
he wants it known that the particular elevation he is looking
for is not of the traditional poetic kind. He doesn’t want to be
mixed up with squares like Milton but to be solemn in his own
way, and so we find, imposed upon the solemnities I have men-
tioned, some colloquial, jazzy phrases (a wiggly prophet; every
third thought) and some deliberately commonplace details
(shaving the beard off, microphone around the neck, Quaker
Oats box) to make clear, as it were, Ferlinghetti’s own cultural
position.

Now I’m not sure that I have any serious objections to
what either Booth or Ferlinghetti is trying to do in these particu-
lar passages. I would not wish to argue, for example, against
the aged principle that the language of poetry should be some-
how distinguishable from prose; so, to the extent that Booth
and Ferlinghetti are simply trying to affirm that principle I am
mostly with them. But if I now put before you a different kind
of affirmation of the same principle I may be able to demon-
strate that stiffness is not necessarily “built in” to that principle
— or, in other words, that naturalness is not impossible in
our modern stone room:

“So then you won’t fight?”
“Yes, your Honour,” I said, “that’s right.”
“Now is it that you simply aren’t willing,
Or have you a fundamental moral objection to killing?”
Says the judge, blowing his nose
And making his words stand to attention in long rows...
These are the first lines of a poem called “Dooley Is A Traitor”
by a young English poet, James Michie. And lest I be accused of
searching about for dialect and conversation in verse to find
eamples of naturalness, here is another example, from another
English poet. This time I’ll give the whole poem:

A Tribute to the Founder
By bluster, graft, and doing people down
Sam Baines got rich, but mellowing at last,
Felt that by giving something to the town
He might undo the evils of his past.

His hope was to prevent the local youth
From making the mistakes that he had made:
Choosing expediency instead of truth,
And quitting what was honest for what paid.

A university seemed just the thing,
And that old stately home the very place.
Sam wept with pleasure at its opening.
He died too soon to weep at its disgrace.

Graft is refined among the tea and scones,
Bluster (new style) invokes the public good,
And doing-down gets done in pious tones
That Sam tried to put on, but never could.

This one is by Kingsley Amis. All of these poems except the
Ferlinghetti poem are from the new paperback anthology, New
Poets of England and America, Second Selection, edited by Don-
ald Hall and Robert Pack. No American beats are represented in
the anthology, due to some quirk of principle in Mr. Pack, so I
had to go to a competing anthology (Grove) for Ferlinghetti. I
find the rhetorical differences striking between the English and
American samples here; I note that the English poets are using
the most commonplace verse convention of all — rhyme — as
their chief formality, and that their forms, such as they are, seem
cozy as an old shoe. The Amis poem is very like E. A. Robinson;
the Michie poem is reminiscent of Hardy. They are both, I think,
serious poems (that is, they qualify for the stony room), but
comfortably serious. The rhetoric doesn’t get in the way, call
attention to itself. The statements come out cleanly and easily,
with none of the strain and tension noticeable in the American
poems.

I grant that strain and tension may be, on occasion, func-
tional properties — I know that much is made of them in our
textbooks — but I cannot grant that they are virtues in them-
selves, and that all serious verse should therefore display them.
Yet so much serious modern American verse does display them
— indeed, go out of its way to display them — that I have the
impression that rhetorical ease has itself become somehow un-
fashionable in this country in verse, except on occasion in our
discredited light verse. And I find it strange that the English,
noted for their rhetorical formality and their stone-cold parlors,
should be in the lead in trying to get the poets to take their
shoes off in the parlor. But they are. I recommend the new Hall-
Pack anthology to you as evidence, and I think that in almost

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any American beat anthology the point will be further demonstrated, though there are a few American poets who can be compared favorably with my English examples — I think, for example, of Kenneth Koch’s work and of some of the recent long poems by Howard Nemerov.

Now why did I begin on the subject of light verse? My time runs out, but surely the connection is clear, that poetic practices which put light verse out in left field may lead — and I think in fact have led — to conventions in serious poetry which positively endanger poetry as a living language. We need our Popes and Byrons as well as our Nashes and Armours; we need the elements of the familiar and the traditional in the stone room as well as in what is usually called these days the rumpus room.