



ESSAY

Is It Poetry or Is It Verse?

The president of the Poetry Foundation weighs in on 2Pac Shakur, "The Cremation of Sam McGee," and "Jabberwocky."

BY JOHN BARR



Introduction

Sometimes amusing and often embarrassing to "serious" poets, popular verse is all over the place. The Poetry Foundation's president, John Barr, takes a look at what separates "serious" poetry from the rest.

1.

Question: What do the following poems have in common?

* * *

It seemed to me a simple thing since my socks was showin' through: Turn my old boots out to pasture, and buy a pair—brand new. Well, they built this cowboy K-mart outa town there in the Mall, Where I parked my Studdybaker after shippin' drys this fall.

* * *

There R no words 2 express how much I truly care So many times I fantasize of feelings we can share My heart has never known the Joy u bring 2 me As if GOD knew what I wanted and made u a reality

* * *

My brother built a robot that does not exactly work, as soon as it was finished, it began to go berserk, its eyes grew incandescent and its nose appeared to gleam, it bellowed unbenignly and its ears emitted steam.

Answer: They are the opening lines of poems by leading writers in their respective fields. And they all, most likely, set on edge the teeth of the readers of Poetry magazine.

It's not just snobbery. People who care about their poetry often experience genuine feelings of embarrassment, even revulsion, when confronted with cowboy poetry, rap and hip-hop, and children's poetry not written by "adult" poets. Their readerly sensibilities are offended. (If the writing gives them any pleasure, it is a guilty pleasure.) The fact that Wallace McRae, Tupac Shakur, and Jack Prelutsky wrote these works for large, devoted audiences simply adds insult to the injury. Somewhat defensively, the serious poetry crowd dismisses such work as verse, not poetry, and generally acts so as to avoid it, if at all possible, in the future. The fact that these different kinds of poetry don't communicate, don't do business with one another, is not just a matter of lost e-mail addresses. The advocates of each know what they like, and it's definitely not what the others are doing. The result is a poetry world of broad divides, a balkanized system of poetries with their own sovereign audiences, prizes, and heroes. The only thing they share is the word poetry, and that not willingly.

There's nothing wrong with this, a generally peaceful coexistence of live-and-let-live poetry communities, except to those who require, for intellectual comfort, a universal theory of poetry that ties it all together. It also matters to the Poetry Foundation and organizations like it, which must make choices and use their finite resources to support some kinds of poetry while not others.

2.

Efforts to define the difference between poetry and verse (like efforts to define the difference between poetry and prose) have been with us for a long time. Verse is often a term of disparagement in the poetry world, used to dismiss the work of people who want to write poetry but don't know how. Verse, in this usage, means unsophisticated or poorly written poetry. But quality of writing is not the real difference between the two. Yes, there is plenty of poorly written verse out there, but there is also plenty of poorly written poetry—and sometimes the verse is the better crafted.

There are strange things done in the midnight sun By the men who moil for gold; The Arctic trails have their secret tales That would make your blood run cold; The Northern Lights have seen queer sights, But the queerest they ever did see Was that night on the marge of Lake Lebargé I cremated Sam McGee.

Robert Service's "The Cremation of Sam McGee," with no help from the critical establishment, is still going strong after a century, while most early Yeats is read today only because it was written by Yeats. To use verse as a pejorative term, then, is to lose the use of it as a true distinction.

George Orwell gives us another way to think about this when he describes Kipling as "a good bad poet."

A good bad poem is a graceful monument to the obvious. It records in memorable form—for verse is a mnemonic device, among other things—some emotion which very nearly every human being can share.

Into this same pot Orwell puts "The Charge of the Light Brigade," the work of Bret Harte—and presumably that of Robert Service. "There is a great deal of good bad poetry in English," says Orwell; by implication, there is even more bad bad poetry. My own nominations for the latter include the work of Edgar Guest, whose Collected Poems, in a signed limp leather edition, was one of two books of poetry in the house where I grew up (a wedding present to my parents).

Ma has a dandy little book that's full of narrow slips, An' when she wants to pay a bill a page from it she rips; She just writes in the dollars and the cents and signs her name An' that's as good as money, though it doesn't look the same.

Orwell's distinction, between good bad poetry and just plain bad poetry, is one based on quality of execution, of craftsmanship. Good bad poetry is verse competently—even memorably—written. But his distinction leaves unaddressed the nature of the poetry itself.

3.

Verse, I have come to think, is poetry written in pursuit of limited objectives: to entertain us with a joke or tall tale, to give us the inherent pleasures of meter and rhyme. It is not great art, nor is it trying to be. Verse, as Orwell says, tells us something we already know—as often as not something we know we already know. Verse is not an instrument of exploration, but rather a tool of affirmation. Its rewards lie not in the excitements of discovery, but in the pleasures of encountering the familiar. Writers of verse have done their job when they make lines that conform to the chosen meter—and do not go beyond it. Frost's notion, "The possibilities for tune from dramatic tones of meaning struck across the rigidity of a limited meter are endless," is unvisited territory. Verse does not seek to know the unknown or to express the unexpected, nor does it undertake the risk of failure that both entail.

"Serious" poetry, on the other hand, is written in pursuit of an open-ended goal. It seeks to use language, in its full potential, to encompass reality, both external and internal, in the fullness of its complexity. Unlike verse, poetry does not bring our experience of the world down to the level of the homily or the bromide, and sum it all up in a soothing platitude. It does not pursue simple conclusions or familiar returns. Rather, it is a voyage of discovery into the unknown. Of the figure a poem makes, Frost says,

Like a piece of ice on a hot stove the poem must ride on its own melting. . . . Its most precious quality will remain its having run itself and carried away the poet with it. . . . It can never lose its sense of a meaning that once unfolded by surprise as it went.

A poem begins in delight, he says, and ends in wisdom. Verse begins in delight and ends in . . . more delight. The difference between poetry and verse, then, is the difference between an explorer and a tour guide. Verse tells us, finally, that all is well. Poetry, on the contrary, tells us that things are not as we thought they were. Verse does not ask us to change our lives. Poetry does.

At its best, verse can cross over into the realm of serious poetry. Children's poetry, in particular, can speak at the same time to its intended audience of the young or very young, while holding the attention of an experienced reader.

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

In the recent finals of Poetry Out Loud, the national recitation contest cosponsored by the Poetry Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts, if any one poem drove the judges to thoughts of suicide if they had to hear it one more time, it was probably Lewis Carroll's "Jabberwocky." Yet the poem probably stands as high today in the critical community as it does with young readers. Constructed wholly out of neologisms, the poem tells its tale in a parallel universe. Many of the new schools of poetry that followed it in the 20th century could claim "Jabberwocky" as a progenitor. With a little effort, you can even get Mother Goose and Dr. Seuss to resonate with contemporary poetry's fascination for the nonrational. The nonsense of children's verse converges with the non-sense of the fanciest experimental poetry.

Most verse has no following in the critical world because it needs none to be understood and appreciated. Most verse also receives no support from the programs of the Poetry Foundation (with the exception of children's poetry). This is not so much because the Foundation takes a position on the value of verse as poetry, although the legacy of Poetry magazine strongly inclines us to the "serious." It is rather because the mission of the Foundation is to discover and address poetry's greatest unmet needs. (The estate of Tupac Shakur is presumably doing just fine without the Poetry Foundation, thank you very much.) The exception is children's poetry, which the Foundation supports because of its importance to the future of the entire art form. Findings from our major study—Poetry in America—show that a lifelong interest in reading poetry is most likely if developed early and reinforced thereafter.

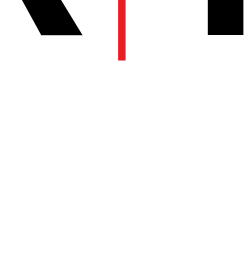
Whether it's "Jack and Jill ran up the hill" or "There once was a man from Nantucket," there is a kind of poem that won't get out of our ears, even as it refuses our serious attention in the matter of its sense. There is a place in the poetry world for verse—if it is memorably written—and we wish it well in all of its variety.

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John Barr served as the first president of the Poetry Foundation from 2004 to 2013, where he worked with the board to develop the Foundation's strategic plan and to build a permanent home for Poetry magazine, the first in its 100-year history. He has taught in the graduate writing program of...

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Comments



JOSH WARN

Hmm. Reading this essay and browsing on the poetryfoundation site may change my mind about reading in cyberspace.

November 12, 2006



JESSE

I usually find myself skimming the text on web sites, in a hurry to get to something solid, as if digging through a mound of popcorn looking for a corned beef on rye. Generally on the web the sandwich is not to be found, but from the first few sentences of John Barr's piece, I was feeling I could slow down and devour the food for thought he presents.

November 28, 2006

JESSE

This guy points Tupac in the same category as these meaningless verse writers. Has this guy even listened to Tupac? I highly doubt it. Tupac may not be a Shakespear or W.B. Yeats but his so called verse is a lot more meaningful then what this guy gives it credit for. The same thing goes for rappers such as Common, Nas, Talib Kweli, and even Jay-Z. This guy has a closed mind view on rap. I mean he doesn't even listen to rap. If he did he would have quoted rap lyrics in his article. Sorry but I think this guys being a jerk.

December 3, 2006

LAR

The author certainly makes some good points. I heartily agree with the statement that there is a great deal of bad poetry out there right now. I would like poetry to be more poetic than much of what I see. Sometimes we need the pleasure of the familiar that the author attributes to verse. Other times we need the challenge of poetry. "Verse does not ask us to change our lives. Poetry does." For myself I need both, but I ask that each be well done. I love the concept that poetry begins in delight and ends in wisdom. Poets, let's not skip the delight.

December 5, 2006

JESSE

Oh really Lar, John Donne, Emily Dickson, Charles Baudelaire, William Butler Yeats, and Edgar Allen Poe ask us to change or to be verse writers. Art for arts sake. Tupac challanges people to change their lives and attitudes more then above mentioned poets. Does this make Tupac more of a poet then them? Most certainly not. I disagree with just about everything this article says, its written by someone whose close minded. Granted a someone who knows way more about poetry as a whole then I ever will, but still a close minded someone. Your whole idea of poetry challenging people to change their lives also makes John Keats, Shakespear, and E.E. Cummings out to be verse writers. Please!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

December 5, 2006

JESSE

Once again sorry for their types. Poetry does often challenge our perception of life or reality but that's not necessarily the same thing as challenging us to change our lives, like in joining some political clause or giving more to charity.

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