

Is It Poetry or Is It Verse?

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(1522 words)

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 all wrote these 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 email 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 co-existence of live-and-let-live poetry communities, except to those who require, for intellectual comfort, a universal theory of poetry that ties it all altogether. It also matters to the Poetry Foundation and organizations like it, who 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 toil 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 Lebarge
I cremated Sam McGee.*

“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 to 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 poem itself.

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 excitement of discovery, but in the pleasures of encountering the familiar. Verse does not seek to know the unknown or to express the unexpected, nor does it undertake the risk of failure which 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 mimsy were the borogoves,
And the mome raths outgrabe.*

Lewis Carroll's "Jabberwocky" probably stands, today, even higher in the critical community than it does with young readers. Constructed wholly out of neologisms, the poem tells its tale from a parallel universe. Many of the new schools of poetry that followed in the 20th century could claim it a progenitor. With a little effort, you can even get Mother Goose and Dr. Seuss to resonate with contemporary poetry's fascination for the non-rational. 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 (the exception is 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. Whether "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.