

SOME ASPECTS OF LIGHT VERSE

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS FROM

AUSTIN DOBSON,

OGDEN NASH,

AND

WALKER GIBSON

A THESIS

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We hereby recommend that the Master's thesis prepared under our supervision by Sylvia Bigby Major
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Truth is humorous: "It is not truth as such, of course, that is a joke. The joke is to have some other trend of expectation, one perhaps belonging to our cultural or stucco selves, go playfully to smash, and in the wreckage find this deeper satisfaction to our sense of what is real. The face of truth is a strange face, at which when it obtrudes suddenly we can not help but smile, and yet it is also an intimately familiar face, and notwithstanding our perpetual flight from it, well loved."

Max Eastman, Enjoyment of Laughter

PREFACE

"Some Aspects of Light Verse" is an examination of the characteristics of light verse with special attention to subject matter and style and with illustrations from Austin Dobson, an English poet of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; Ogden Nash, a current American poet who came on the literary scene in the thirties; and Walker Gibson, also a current American poet, who is a professor of English, a critic, and a writer of both prose and poetry.

When I began my study of light verse, I found that light verse is a subject relegated to the end of studies of poetry and, more often than not, dispensed with in a paragraph or two. I found the field of light verse broadly defined by some, narrowly defined by others who did not agree with each other on the boundaries. I found that when I got ready to set my own boundaries, I could find some support for any that I might choose to make. I believe my definition of the subject would be acceptable to the majority of critics whose works I have consulted and is more extensive than any of theirs.

I have concentrated on the works of modern writers and as a result have been interested in the turns light verse has taken in the twentieth century. But, as I have noted, there are many aspects of light verse that have remained constant throughout the centuries, or that return to the literary scene from time to time after having gone out of fashion.

It was my good fortune to meet one of the poets about whom I have written. Walker Gibson was the guest lecturer for the 1966 Writer's Conference at Texas Woman's University. I heard his lecture Friday evening, April 22, "Poems by a Composition Teacher," which included recitals of some of his poems, and I was in his workshop on poetry the following morning. I gathered much useful information on the craft of light verse. After his appearance here, I decided to use his verse as part of my study.

I wish also to acknowledge the patient counsel and guidance given me by Dr. Autrey Nell Wiley in all matters pertaining to this paper and to acknowledge the insights given me by Dr. Eleanor James and Dr. Judith McDowell through their classroom discussions of such matters as

forms and trends in poetry and verse and through their research assignments by which I was able to ferret out some further aspects of light verse.

June 26, 1967

Sylvia Major
Sylvia Beth Bigby Major

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

"Light verse is a name rather loosely given to a wide variety of forms of metrical composition, worldly in character and most often witty, humorous, ingenious, or satirical."¹ It may simply be an exercise in the "facile and charming"² use of rhyme and meter, or, as M. L. Rosenthal and A. J. M. Smith say, it may be intensely serious since "seriousness has nothing to do with solemnity and can be accompanied by a good deal of levity."³ A bright and polished exercise in the light manner which describes the writing of this genre is Austin Dobson's "You Bid Me Try":

You bid me try, BLUE-EYES, to write
A Rondeau. What!--forthwith?--to-night?
 Reflect. Some skill I have, 'tis true;--
 But thirteen lines!--and rhymed on two!
 'Refrain,' as well. Ah, hapless plight!

¹A. J. M. Smith, "Light Verse," Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics, ed. Alex Preminger (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1965), p. 446.

²David McCord, What Cheer (New York: Coward-McCann, 1945), p. x.

³Exploring Poetry (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1955), p. 477.

Still, there are five lines,--ranged aright.
 These Gallic bonds, I feared, would fright
 My easy Muse. They did, till you--
You bid me try!

That makes them eight. The port's in sight;--
 'Tis all because your eyes are bright!
 Now just a pair to end in 'oo'--
 When maids command, what can't we do
 Behold!--the RONDEAU, tasteful, light,
You bid me try!¹

A serious piece accompanied by humor is Walker Gibson's "Fear of Falling":

Among the terrors of the trees
 That kept our ancestors alive,
 The fear of falling made them seize
 The limbs they slept on and survive,
 And we inherit from that race
 Bad dreams, sometimes, of drops through space.

What instinct is it, would you say,
 What fear of gamma rays or guns,
 Will keep a man alive today
 To leave a nightmare to his sons?
 I tell my children from their birth:
 Hang to your branch for all you're worth.²

Light verse does not rank as high on the literary scale as poetry. Though it takes as much literary skill to make us laugh as it does to make us cry or to feel deeply, we cannot take seriously anything that is laughable or that causes a smile. Though it takes as much knowledge

¹The Complete Poetical Works of Austin Dobson (London: Oxford University Press, 1923), p. 327.

²Come As You Are (New York: Hastings House, 1958), p. 23.

of human nature to write an occasional piece as it does to write a piece on an enduring emotion, we cannot take anything that is fleeting as seriously as something that is enduring. Though it takes as much knowledge of technique to devise an ingenious form as it does to fit an emotion to an established form, we cannot take ingenuity as seriously as we take tradition. Though it takes as much command of language to make a perfect little piece as it does to make a grand epic, we cannot take the little as seriously as the grand. We do not value the expression of the intellect as much as we value the expression of emotion, though we take wit more seriously than formerly. We also look with more respect on formal language than we do on the colloquial, though, as Gerard Previn Meyer notes, the formal language of poetry is moving toward the colloquial and away from the formal.¹ In fact, the distinction between serious poetry and light verse is becoming blurred, according to Don Cameron Allen, writing in 1962.²

J. Berg Esenwein and Mary Eleanor Roberts distinguish between light verse and poetry in this way: "Poetry is a

¹"New 'Humours' from a Neat Wit," Saturday Review, XXXVIII (June 18, 1955), 20.

²The Moment of Poetry (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1962), p. 77.

spirit, verse is its outward form. Poetry is born, verse is made. Poetry is emotion, verse is gesture."¹ Frederick Locker-Lampson says that light verse is to poetry as Dresden China is to Michaelangelo.² There is room for both in literature. People are not always serious any more than they are always laughing. Louis Macneice believes that "trivial talk, humorous talk, joke-talk . . . should be represented on the poetic plane" as well as "love talk" and serious talk. Indeed, he points out, there is little serious poetry without a touch of lightness, nor is there much light verse without serious undertone, no matter how faint.³ Even in the poetic trifle by Dobson, quoted in the first paragraph of this paper, we see the seriousness with which Dobson views his craft. While teasing about the difficulty of creating a rondeau, he is putting together a rondeau, perfect in rhyme and meter.

Light verse flourishes under certain social conditions. It flourishes in sophisticated times, times, as a reviewer

¹The Art of Versification (Rev. ed.; Springfield, Mass.: The Home Correspondence School, 1920), p. 13.

²Lyra Elegantiarum (Rev. ed.; London: Ward, Lock, and Co., 1891), p. ix.

³Modern Poetry: A Personal Essay (London: Oxford University Press, 1938), pp. 178-179.

cited by Locker-Lampson explains, when it is taboo to show strong feeling. Light verse is a good vehicle for hiding emotion.

We are not going to wear our hearts upon our sleeves; rather than that we shall pretend to have no heart at all; and if, perchance, a bit of it should peep out, we shall hide it again as quickly as possible, and laugh at the exposure of a good joke.¹

Light verse also flourishes in times of pomposness, self-satisfaction, or insipidness, especially in political circles. William K. Zinsser points out the rise in satirical humor during the bland Eisenhower days and again during the Johnson administration.² Light verse does not flourish in periods of romanticism. Romantic rhetoric is too "luscious"³; romantic poets take themselves too seriously: they cannot laugh at themselves.

The trends in light verse correspond to the trends in social and literary life. In Augustan Rome, for example, Horace reflected in his poems the ideals of the urbane society in which he moved. His verse had polite geniality, the appearance of careless ease, the good sense, and the

¹Locker-Lampson, p. xviii.

²"American Humor, 1966," Horizon, VIII (Spring 1966), 117.

³Henry Wells, New Poets from Old (New York: Columbia University Press, 1940), p. 62.

wit characteristic of the social circle that he was most at home in.¹ The principles of flawless workmanship that he laid down in the Ars Poetica have been the creed of writers of light verse ever since.² The classical forms he used and some of his themes, especially the carpe diem theme, are still popular with modern poets.

The French forms used by Dobson are characteristically polite and charming, and they conform to exact standards. They were influenced by the strict rules of decorum and the elegant atmosphere at the eighteenth century French court where they were revived after having been ignored since medieval times when they were first used in Provence. They were also influenced by the chivalric attitude toward women that grew up out of medieval France, an attitude that was unknown in the verse of Horace.³

Though choosing to write English verse in French forms, Dobson had a literary heritage in England. The Elizabethans afforded some examples, but the poets who were part of the rise of classicism in the seventeenth century were more

¹Charles F. Johnson, Forms of English Poetry (New York: American Book Company, 1904), p. 279.

²W. Y. Sellar, The Roman Poets of the Augustan Age: Horace and the Elegiac Poets (Oxford: the Clarendon Press, 1899), pp. 115-116.

³Pp. 279-280, 301.

given to speaking in the light and witty manner. Among the latter, Robert Herrick earned lasting literary fame by writing light verse. His delicate artistry, his experimentations with meter, his simple diction and syntax, his high level of performance, his mingling of the classical spirit with his own English spirit, and his ability to make even religious matters graceful and airy contribute to his success. His verse has the genial tone and the air of careless ease reminiscent of Horace, and the chivalric attitude toward women reminiscent of medieval France. Poets writing later in the seventeenth century made extensive use of wit. Figures of speech often used in light verse--conceits, antithesis in the form of oxymorons, and paradox--were popular; they employed the intellect in a time of much intellectual questioning and searching. The eighteenth-century Augustans--John Gay, Matthew Prior, and Alexander Pope--wrote verse characterized by

. . . a neatness of expression, an agile wit, a cool heart, a critical spirit, a deal of the salt of satire, an aristocratic temper, and a meticulous avoidance of vulgarity. It preferred a strictly humanistic outlook, an urban and a cosmopolitan spirit, an adaptability to town and country life,¹ and a disillusionment that abhorred uncontrolled enthusiasms.

¹Henry W. Wells, p. 282.

In the romantic period, with the exception of Byron, major poets cared little for writing light verse; but with the Victorians and their refined, decorous society came society verse or vers de société, characterized by grace, polish, restraint, gaiety, and erudition, as exemplified in the verse of Austin Dobson.

In America, the cultural scene has fostered three types of humor in American verse. With the rugged pioneer spirit of earlier times and the spirit of the Old West still prevalent in some areas of our country, we have native humor, defined by Hamlin Hill as the humor of the hearty guffaw,¹ which I recognize in Ogden Nash's "The Hunter":

The hunter crouches in his blind
'Neath camouflage of every kind,
And conjures up a quacking noise
To lend allure to his decoys.
This grown-up man, with pluck and luck,
Is hoping to outwit a duck.²

With the rise of an urbane, sophisticated, slightly insane and despairing contemporary society, says Hill, we have dementia praecox humor, the humor of the neurotic giggle. Nash's poetry frequently "reflects in a light-hearted way the notion that the individual and his times are somehow

¹"Modern American Humor: The Janus Laugh," College English, XXV (December 1963), 176.

²Verses from 1929 on ("The Modern Library"; New York: Random House, Inc., 1959), p. 346.

out of joint."¹ We get a feeling of the zaniness of life, for example, in Nash's "Two Goes into Two Once, If You Can Get It There."

All my life I have been a witness of things,
Among which I keep witnessing the eternal unfitness
of things.

Daily it is my wont
To notice how things that were designed to fit each
other, don't.

Getting a cigarette into a cigarette-holder is like
the round hole and the square peg,
And getting the cork back into the vermouth bottle
is like reinserting the cuckoo in the egg.

Why is the card-case always just a smidgin smaller
than the deck?

Why does it take a 15 3/4 collar to encircle a
15 1/2 neck?

Experience is indeed a teacher, and I have learned
this fact from it,

That no suitcase is large enough to recontain the
clothes you just unpacked from it.

No wonder the grapes set on edge the teeth of the
little foxes;

The minute you buy a dozen silver or brocade or
leather match-box holders the match-box makers
change the size of the boxes.

I am baffled, I weave between Scylla and Charybdis,
between a writ of replevin and a tort;

I shall console myself with the reflection that
even in this world, ever perverse and ever²
shifting, two pints still make one cavort.

With the rise of rootlessness and restlessness, we have black humor, which is described by William K. Zinsser in his article "American Humor, 1966," in Horizon,³ as outrageous, delighting in its own outrageousness, mocking sacred

¹Pp. 170, 174.

²Verses from 1929 on, p. 428.

³VIII (Spring 1966), 119-120.

American values, venturing beyond reality, even beyond those events that are slightly beyond reality. The black humorist sees in the morning's headlines a funny story (for example, the story of Nasser and all his United Arab Republic being soundly whipped by little Israel); if he wants to be more than just a reporter, he must go beyond the funny things that are really happening to the exaggerated, the ridiculous, the unreal. In "A Bogy for Yogi or Sticks and Stones May Break Their Bones, But Names Will Lose a Sponsor," Nash tells the story of the Yankee baseball team manager who suffers a disastrous season because all his high-salaried players are ailing.

Consider a typical case:

The diamond was so littered with papers that a \$37,500 runner broke his ankle sliding into Dorothy Kilgallen's column, which he mistook for second base.¹

The manager replaces the players with a group of people who have good batting averages--Joe Schlitz, Chuck Pabst, Jim Chesterfield, Phil Morris, Dino Sinclair, and Scooter Texaco among others. The substitution of high rating television commercials for bruised baseball players is an exaggeration.

A trend in American verse pointed out by Meyer in 1955² was the trend away from the vogue of seventeenth-

¹New Yorker, XL (September 5, 1964), 32.

²See n. 1, p. 3, for "New 'Humours' from a Neat Wit," Saturday Review (1955).

century wit, exemplified by John Crow Ransom and Allen Tate in the 1930's, toward the consideration of form. Meyer believed urbane vers de société was on the rise.¹ Johnson, writing in 1904, had pointed out that America had not known society verse because Americans had not had the cultivated leisure that is characteristic of society in the old world.² Now that we have more time for leisure, we have more time for trifles and more time for consideration of form. Both Nash and Gibson show knowledge of form, Nash by desecrating it and Gibson by perfecting it in such measures as the iambic tetrameter and iambic pentameter couplets. Neither cultivates the elegance and politeness of Austin Dobson.

Austin Dobson³ was born Henry Austin Dobson at Plymouth, England, on January 18, 1840, to George Clarisse Dobson, a civil engineer, whose mother was French, and Augusta Harris Dobson. He completed his education at Strasbourg, France, and at sixteen entered the civil service of England as a clerk in the Board of Trade. He eventually rose to Principal and served the Board for forty-five years. He was married to Frances Mary Beardmore in 1868. His wife was a writer of

¹P. 20. ²P. 300.

³DNB, Supplement (1912-1921), pp. 157-158.

children's stories. They had five daughters and five sons, one of whom wrote a biography of his father. Dobson's first printed poem was "A City Flower," published in 1864. From 1868 on he was a frequent contributor to several magazines. He published the following books of verse: Vignettes in Rhyme in 1873, Proverbs in Porcelain in 1877, Old-World Idylls in 1883, At the Sign of the Lyre in 1885, and Collected Poems in 1897. He published also eleven prose works consisting of biographies and essays. From 1883 on he devoted himself to eighteenth-century studies and published eleven volumes of essays. He died September 2, 1929.¹

Sir Edmund Gosse, Dobson's good friend, tells us that Dobson began his career with vers de société. It was typically Mid-Victorian, scrupulously nice, with gravity and passion carefully excluded. In the early seventies, he was influenced by the pre-Raphaelite poets: he began to treat romantic subjects in a serious manner and with a new refinement of language. He lacked the audacity and fire of the pre-Raphaelites, but his experiments freed him

¹Alban Dobson, Austin Dobson (London: Oxford University Press, 1928), pp. 1-15.

from vers de société and taught him the value of combining richness with simplicity and the necessity of rejecting mere conventional verbiage.¹ James Keith Robinson tells us that Dobson began to experiment with French forms in the middle seventies. He was directly influenced by Théodore de Banville. He, like Banville, "though not as sprightly, threaded the maze of intricate forms, ignoring or lightly mocking the world of his own time."² In the late seventies, according to Gosse, Dobson returned to his earlier manner, writing vers de société with refreshed vigor and a touch of gentle human indulgence. After turning to eighteenth-century studies, he showed in his poetry that he was dominated by his interest in the art and life and literature of England and France of that century. He was also strongly influenced by a study of Horace recommended to him by Tennyson.³ In his last years he wrote verses about post-Victorian subjects.

Gosse, in his evaluation of Dobson, says that "he was the laureate of the Nice Young Girl, tall, fair, and serious, in white muslin and innocently anticipating the Eligible Young Man."⁴ Dobson was aware that he might become

¹Sir Edmund Gosse, "An Appreciation," The Quarterly (January 1922), cited in Austin Dobson, pp. 20-28.

²"Austin Dobson and the Rondeliers," Modern Language Quarterly, XIV (March 1953), 34-35.

³Pp. 28-30, 41. ⁴Pp. 31-33.

sentimental about youth and love and consciously strove to keep dignity and lightness and good manners in his verse. He was aided by his impeccably perfect form.

Ogden Nash¹ was born August 19, 1902, in Rye, New York, to Edmund Strudwick Nash and Mattie Chenault Nash. His ancestors were from North Carolina. He spent one year at Harvard before leaving to take a job as a bond salesman in New York for two years. Later he worked for Doubleday in several capacities, was on the staff of the New Yorker, became associated with two publishing firms, and wrote scenarios in Hollywood.² He and his wife, the former Frances Rider Leonard, now live in New York and Little Boar's Head, New Hampshire, and he devotes his time to writing and lecturing. His two daughters and his grandchildren have been the subjects for some of his verses. He has written over a dozen books of verse, some of them for children, and he continues to contribute to a wide variety of magazines.

In 1939 Leonard Bacon said of Nash that "his cock-eyed rhymes and gangling lines . . . look so innocent of thought

¹Who's Who in America. Vol. XXXIV (Chicago: A. N. Marquis Company, 1966-1967), p. 1544.

²Louis Untermeyer, ed., Modern American Poetry (Mid Century ed.; New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1950), p. 604.

and aren't."¹ Ben Ray Redman² in 1953 noted that there was a mellowing in the verse of Nash. One begins to see tolerance, though not to excess, in his satirical barbs. Redman also notes the autobiographical element in the works of Nash; his earlier verse is about the peeves and observations of a young man, a young husband, and a young father. Some of his verses today have a grandfatherly touch, as do these lines from "Preface to the Past":

Time all of a sudden tightens the tether,
And the outspread years are drawn together.
How confusing the beams from memory's lamp are;
One day a bachelor, the next a grampa.³

In 1959 Walker Gibson, reviewing Nash's book Verses from 1929 on, said:

Mr. Nash will take no nonsense from recalcitrant syllables that resist going together in rhymes; he weds them by force, sometimes by shotgun He can indeed do any thing, and at best he does it with much charm and a pleasing modesty. Of course Ogden Nash is not always at his best. There are 522 pages of poems in this book, selected from six previous volumes, and some are funnier than others. There is a certain monotony, and the most recent poems are startlingly similar to the earliest ones.⁴

¹"Humors and Careers," Saturday Review, XX (April 29, 1939), 22.

²"Life and Times of Ogden Nash," Saturday Review, XXXVI (April 11, 1953), 29.

³Verses from 1929 on, p. 509.

⁴Book Review, New York Times, November 8, 1959, p. 12.

Walker Gibson¹ was born in Jacksonville, Florida, January 19, 1919. He grew up in Albany, New York, was graduated from Yale in 1940, and served in the Army Air Force during World War II. He did graduate work at the University of Iowa and held a fellowship in New Mexico. Before joining the English faculty of New York University, he taught at Amherst College, the Norfolk Music School of Yale, and the YMHA Poetry Center in New York. He and his wife live in New Jersey; they have three children. He is the author of two books of verse, The Reckless Spenders and Come As You Are, and three books in prose on the craft of writing: Seeing and Writing, The Limits of Language, and Poems in Progress. He has contributed verse to such literary magazines as the New Yorker, the Atlantic Monthly, and the Saturday Review.

Dudley Fitts, writing a review of Come As You Are in the New York Times, says Gibson has an urbane, warm manner and is an engaging practitioner of light verse. He is not as versatile or as sensitive as some other practitioners.² Meyer says of him that he is tolerantly satirical, that he is not funny or humorous, but that in his colloquial,

¹Directory of American Scholars (4th ed.; New York: R. R. Bowker Company, 1964), p. 110.

²November 9, 1958, p. 12.

conversational tone, his concision, his sudden hint of ironic meaning, he is close to Frost.¹

From these three poets I shall draw examples to illustrate different aspects of light verse, beginning with an analysis of the subject matter and concluding with a study of their style.

¹P. 20.

CHAPTER II

SUBJECT MATTER

The subject matter for light verse is as varied as human nature. The writer of light verse may choose humorous topics, such as a husband trapped in the house during a meeting of the ladies' garden club, or trifles, such as ball point pens. He may choose topics that are ordinarily considered serious--marriage, virtue, religion--and treat them in a light manner. He may choose heavy subjects--death, hate, war--and treat them with an air of detachment that makes them light. He will see that his verse is as light as his subject is light. Subject matter alone may or may not determine whether a verse is light or not although there are guidelines for choosing suitable topics for light verse, and there are topics that are favored by writers of light verse.

W. H. Auden¹ sees light verse as having for its subject matter the everyday social life of its period or the experiences of the poet as an ordinary human being. Charles W.

¹The Oxford Book of Light Verse (London: Oxford University Press, 1938), p. ix.

Cooper¹ views light verse as being about current foibles and follies of life, as touching upon the fashions of the day and the slang of the hour. These two twentieth-century critics agree that the world that the writer is a part of is a source for light-verse topics.

The contemporary world for Austin Dobson (1840-1921) was the late Victorian and two decades following. He wrote primarily of a literary world of the past into which he entered, but he also wrote a series of poems on World War I and a poem on the death of King George. Living during the reign of Queen Victoria, he was a man of a decorous age: he did not write on bawdy or "low-brow" subjects. Loving the eighteenth century, he caught its flavor. Participating in the literary world of his time, he wrote of current trends in poetry and led a movement to introduce French forms. He used the perennially favorite topics of writers of other ages. He spent many years in eighteenth-century research, and, Charles F. Johnson tells us "much of his verse is reminiscent of the eighteenth century."² In his

¹Preface to Poetry (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1943), p. 513.

²P. 293.

"Epilogue to 'Eighteenth Century Vignettes' Second Series)," Dobson said that the reason for his choosing subjects out of the past was that eighteenth-century people are no longer in a condition to sue him:

But--should I fail to render clear
Their title, rank, or station--
I still may sleep secure, nor fear
A suit for defamation.¹

Dobson, then, was a man of two worlds--the one he was born into and the one he studied--and the topics for his verse are from both these worlds.

Ogden Nash is not of the same world as Austin Dobson. In the drawing rooms of Victorian England, Dobson was limited in his choice of subjects by the strict decorum of his age. In the living rooms and commuter trains of our time, Nash has more freedom in choice of subject and in manner of treatment. He can speak of the sex life of an oyster, of the relief of a hearty scratch, or of a maiden's restricted hips. He can handle his subjects in a less superficial and a more frank manner. His world is the world of what Zinsser calls the "city dwellers, fretful and neurotic."² The subject matter for Nash comes largely from the life of the city dweller, his attitudes, his frustrations, his anxieties, the ridiculous things he does. One basis for

¹Works, p. 319.

²P. 116.

his choice of subject matter is given in a "Foreword" to I Couldn't Help Laughing:

. . . the way the cards are cut,
 Nature's the jester, man the butt,
 Which simply leaves it up to us
 To admit that we're ridiculous;
 To view us with irreverent eyes
 And grin when whittled down to size.¹

Nash chooses for his subject matter the ridiculous things we human beings think that we have to do or own or be, and he holds these foibles up for our amusement. In a critique of the young Ogden Nash in 1939, Leonard Bacon says he is preoccupied with more permanent and troublesome considerations than with conventional likes and dislikes. The versifier, says Bacon further, writes of perversities in his environment and gently criticizes them; he writes about the "ridiculously dangerous and the absurdly problematic."² Ben Ray Redman, writing in 1953, calls attention to Nash's life-long war against pet peeves and against "stuffed shirts of all collar-sizes and sleeve-lengths." He calls Nash's poetry a criticism of life.³ Walter Blair says Nash writes of circumstances beyond the poet's control and of the insecurities in the poet's life; he sees "horse sense" in

¹(Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1957), p. i.

²See n. 1, p. 15, for "Humors and Careers," Saturday Review (1939), p. 4.

³See n. 2, p. 15, for "Life and Times of Ogden Nash," Saturday Review (1953), p. 29.

Nash's verse.¹ This modern writer of light verse, then, writes of incongruities, illusions, insecurities; he writes of contemporary attitudes toward child rearing, the success and failure of modern political parties and personages, bills on the first of the month, the gadgetry of our time, twentieth-century transportation, jobs and job-hunting; he also writes of social customs, of natural history, of family and friends, of almost everything.

Whereas Austin Dobson wrote nearly three-hundred fifty verses and Ogden Nash has written over three thousand, Walker Gibson has written approximately seventy-five. Obviously, he has not been so productive and his range in subject matter has not been so wide as that of the other two men. Though he is a contemporary of Nash and has the same freedom of choice in subject matter and treatment as Nash has, he has limited his subjects according to the world he is a part of. He is a professor: he lives in a world of academics and ideas. Some of his subjects deal with new discoveries in science, with history, with technology, with astronomy. He is a married man: he deals with the supermarket, the electric company, the daily routine. He is a literary critic: he echoes themes and passages from other

¹Horse Sense in American Humor (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1942), pp. 297-299.

writers. He writes of suburbia, movies, advertising, space, athletics. He believes that our age is problematic for the humorist, for

It's no fun calling things bizarre
When that's the way things really are.¹

He chooses for his subjects, then, things as they really are because "the way things really are" is funny.

A. S. Burack, editor of The Writer's Handbook,² suggests to the prospective writer of light verse that there is no better material for light verse than the incongruities and absurdities of life reported by the press. From the life and times about which they write, writers of light verse do select incongruities and absurdities to use for topics for their verse, as Austin Dobson did in "New and Old":

For what is old you nothing care--
"Antiques," you say, but leave you cold;
And yet the sun that gilds your hair
Is more than many aeons old.³

In "Umpire"⁴ Walker Gibson laughs at us for calling a ball pitched across a "plate" a strike. In "Power Lines"⁵ he is

¹"Cutting the Comedy," The Reckless Spenders (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1954), p. 45.

²(Boston: The Writer, Inc., 1958), p. 387.

³Works, p. 476. ⁴Reckless Spenders, p. 38.

⁵Ibid., p. 52.

amused at the efforts of the power companies to keep their power lines going straight in a world that is inclined "so toward the round." Ogden Nash sees as absurd the adage that "children ought to agree like little birdies in their nest,"¹ because "birdies" do not agree any more than children do. He thinks children have a point when they remind their parents of the incongruity of saying one day they are too big to do something and the next day saying they are too young, yet.² Nash frequently writes about incongruities.

Writers of light verse also make verse out of comic events or incidents from the current scene. Austin Dobson wrote of "The Water-Cure" given by a magician to a talkative woman: every time she felt the urge to talk, she had to fill her mouth with water until the urge passed.³ Walker Gibson writes of the havoc wrought by a batch of baby chicks in his basement.⁴ Ogden Nash writes of Cousin May's falling through the parlor floor because

Some primal termite knocked on wood
⁵
And tasted it, and found it good.

¹"Birdies, Don't Make Me Laugh," Many Long Years Ago (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1945), p. 35.

²"Epistle to the Olympians," *ibid.*, p. 148.

³Works, p. 257.

⁴"Chicks in the Cellar," Reckless Spenders, p. 50.

⁵"The Termite," Verses from 1929 on, p. 340.

From the current scene also comes occasional verse: verse written to commemorate a special event, either public or private, or verse written about a specific happening. Dobson was fond of writing verses to send with copies of books. He wrote a memorial verse on the death of "Alfred, Lord Tennyson." He wrote verses for the meeting of the Omar Khayyam Club, "For a Charity Annual," and "A Miltonic Exercise" on the occasion of Milton's tercentenary. Both he and Nash have written verses about trips to the seaside. Nash writes for family birthdays and anniversaries. He has preserved for posterity a trip to the circus. He comments on christenings, weddings, shopping trips, and national monuments. Walker Gibson has written of the sinking of a circus ship, the Euzerka; of the downing of the U-2 spy plane; of a class reunion. Occasional verse covers a wide range of topics and may be serious as well as light.

In a genre, one expects certain subjects. Light verse that is called vers de société "should be limited," according to W. Davenport Adams, "to the doings and sayings of the world of fashion, and should deal exclusively with such things as routs and balls, and dinners and receptions."¹

¹Cited by Carolyn Wells, A Vers de Société Anthology (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1907), pp. xxi-xxii.

It should confine itself, says Henry W. Wells, to a study of man: it should not concern itself with nature or with harmonizing the two.¹ Charles F. Johnson says that society verse should dwell upon the agreeable aspects of that life in which the main occupation is to find means of entertainment, especially those aspects that have to do with the relations between the sexes. He describes social verse writers as "men of a happy mood who enjoy to-day, are careless of tomorrow, and do not regard yesterday as wasted because it is a day of pleasure past"²; as men who have "literary culture or at least delicate feeling, lively susceptibility to impressions from the social world, and the power of fixing those impressions in finished verse." These impressions, these skimmings off the surface of society, he says, are "good-humored in tone," show "an intelligent interest in trifles, a content with the surface of things, an ignoring of the real nature and meaning of appearances, and an equal avoidance of the serious and of the tiresome." Though, as Johnson points out, these writers may hint at the less agreeable aspects of society--corruption, vulgarity, sordid ambitions--they rarely deal directly

¹P. 288.

²For this quotation and others in this paragraph, see Johnson, pp. 275-278.

with them. In pointing out some of the virtues of Horace, Johnson suggests to us some good topics for society verse: patriotism, friendliness, decorum, courage, good fellowship, intelligent and sprightly conversation, admiration of beauty, sympathy with frolicsome youth.

Further critical comment on vers de société was made by Austin Dobson. In an introduction to the work of W. M. Praed, he wrote that

"Society Verse" . . . treats almost exclusively of the votum, timor, ira, voluptas (and especially of the voluptas), of that charmed circle of uncertain limits, known conventionally as "good society"--those latter-day Athenians, who, in town or country, spend their time in telling or hearing some new thing, and whose graver and deeper impulses are subordinated to a code of artificial manners.¹

He dealt with the pleasures, the wishes, and the peeves of the fashionable society of the Victorian age and the eighteenth century. His purpose was to entertain and please us: he did not choose any serious moral questions or ideas for reforming the world for his subject matter. In "To Laurence Hutton" that he wrote to accompany a volume of verses, he said:

¹"Winthrop Mackworth Praed," The English Poets, ed. Thomas Humphrey Ward (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1911), IV, 544.

There is no 'mighty purpose' in this book.
 Of that I warn you at the opening page,
 Lest haply 'twixt the leaves you careless look
 And finding nothing to reform the age,
 Fall with the rhyme and rhymer in a rage.
 Let others prate of problems and of powers;
 I bring but fancies born of idle hours,
 That striving only after Art and Ease,
 Have scarcely more of moral than the flowers
 And little else of mission than to please.¹

Vers de société is written by men of the world of culture and sophistication who know and practice the proprieties, who know the traditions and rituals, who know the foibles of that world, and who paint an agreeable picture of it in their verse. The verse of Ogden Nash is not polite enough to be called vers de société. The verse of Walker Gibson deals with appearances only to expose them: his verse is not always agreeable and gay. Austin Dobson wrote often of the entertainments of the leisurely in a pleasant and amusingly benevolent way.

Another genre in which light verse sometimes appears is satire. Topics for satirical light verse come from the dullness, the stupidity, and the pretentiousness of men, writes Alvin B. Kernan in The Plot of Satire.² The outlandish aspects of war and the insecurities of races and nations are proposed by William K. Zinsser as being good topics

¹Works, p. 388.

²(New Haven: Yale University Press, 1965), pp. 4, 36, 84.

for humorous satire. He notes the fun which Americans, including Negro Americans, are now having with Negro satire.¹ M. L. Rosenthal and A. J. M. Smith point out that good subjects for satire are social types, aspects of human nature, foolish or wicked ideas, vices and follies, particular individuals, intellectual vulgarization, social injustice, mechanization, and standardization.² Light-verse satirists cannot resist attacking pomposity wherever it is: in a political demagogue such as Senator Smoot who fights smut³; in a high-flown society matron like Mrs. Cadwallader-Smith⁴; in the would-be poet who met "The Claims of the Muse" with "idiot smile and stains of wine"⁵; or in the antiseptic housewife.⁶

T. K. Whipple says the subject matter for the epigram is as varied as human interest and emotions.⁷ In classical

¹Pp. 118-119. ²Pp. 435-438.

³Nash, "Invocation," Verses from 1929 on, p. 37.

⁴"Pride Goeth Before a Raise," *ibid.*, p. 131.

⁵Dobson, Works, p. 231.

⁶Gibson, "Housecleaning," Reckless Spenders, p. 14.

⁷Martial and the English Epigram from Sir Thomas Wyatt to Ben Jonson ("University of California Publications in Modern Philology," Vol. X; Berkeley, California, 1925), p. 283.

literature, we think of Horace, who used the epigram to sing of the golden mean, the love of the country, and the uniqueness of the now in time. In the English Renaissance, some favorite topics were morality, loquacity of women, misers, faithless wives, aged coquettes, and old libertines.¹ These subjects are still current in epigrams. Ogden Nash chooses as one of his topics for epigrams the subject of natural history, as illustrated by "The Cantaloupe":

One cantaloupe is ripe and lush,
Another's green, another's mush.
I'd buy a lot more cantaloupe
If I possessed a fluoroscope.²

Besides the form of the verse is the tone of the speaker. The subject matter of light verse must never be ponderous, Franklin P. Adams³ tells us. Serious undertones can be there, says Louis Macneice,⁴ and usually are, but the writers never delve too deeply into their subject. What Johnson points out in describing vers de société, I

¹ Hoyt Hopewell Hudson, The Epigram in the English Renaissance (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1947), p. 20

² Verses from 1929 on, p. 333.

³ Innocent Merriment (New York: Whittlesey House, 1942), p. vii.

⁴ P. 179.

think can be applied to light verse in general: the writers give us a superficial glance, a look at things as they seem. Dobson's ladies seem to be part air. "Avice" is so fragile that the poet is afraid to woo her for fear she will fly away.¹ His Greek girl is a nymph-like vision.² His "Virtuoso" is a picture of a superficial person, an art collector, making excuses for not giving to charity.³ The pretty picture is there: the virtuoso is polite and gracious; he gives the charity worker a tour of his treasures. But the undertone of seriousness is there: the unspoken words of the worker are an indictment of the art collector. The world is not the way the virtuoso would make it seem.

When Nash talks about things the way they seem, he talks about always being sick on week days when there is work to be done and not sick on week ends,⁴ or about the frustrating way the cat has of being always out of the house when the mouse is in.⁵ The undertone of seriousness can be seen in "Ma, What's a Banker? or Hush, My Child."

¹Works, p. 78. ²"To A Greek Girl," ibid., p. 117.

³Works, p. 85.

⁴"When the Devil Was Sick Could He Prove It," Many Long Years Ago, p. 12.

⁵"The Cat," Many Long Years Ago, p. 16.

It appears that the banker's

. . . heart simply melts
 For everyone else;
 By love and compassion he's ridden;
 The pay of his clerks
 To reduce, how it irks!
 But he couldn't go South if he didden.¹

To Walker Gibson, the world seems to be dearer when he is above it. In a plane, he realizes his attachment to the "little world."² In his "Street Scene," he speaks of the sunny and shady sides of the street, the shady side hiding sunny back doors and the sunny side hiding "forlorn backyards"; the street side is not all it seems:

And tempted by analogy--
 Those platitudes from gloom and gleam--
 We say it's so with you and me,
 Or so, at least, we say we seem.³

Gibson is not satisfied with leaving things as they seem: he usually cuts to the heart of matters with some cryptic unveiling. In "Noah" he talks about the man who moved to the country to be safe when the "whole works might go smash," but who finds that what seems to be safety is actually a sort of death because men cannot live without other men.⁴ In "An Epistle for Christmas," he says that

¹verses from 1929 on, p. 54.

²"The Flight (First Class) of Walker Gibson," Come as You Are (New York: Hastings House, 1958), p. 10.

³Reckless Spenders, p. 48. ⁴Ibid., p. 40.

The fashion . . . to scorn the vulgar mess
That Christmas has become in our U. S.¹

is hypocritical. The truth is that we would like to indulge in the vulgar mess and receive gifts that cost plenty of money. There is, in fact, more than a hint of seriousness in much of Gibson's verse. He is not satisfied with just appearances; he must go on to expose appearances.

Of the perennial topics treated by writers of light verse love is the one most frequent. Courtship, gallantry, marriage, love, and sex inspire Dobson, Gibson, and Nash to entertain in verses on amorous experiences. In courtship, Dobson's verses show superficial, coy young ladies moving now forward and now backward in the ritualistic dance of flirtation. We see a serious young swain being led on by a not-so-serious young maiden.² We see a dallying young suitor pretending to be hurt with one side of his heart while looking out for a new love with the other side.³ We read of a girl on the train with whom the poet-speaker flirted and from whom he parted without ever learning her name⁴; of Lyce at whose gate he would stand just so long

¹ Come As You Are, p. 54.

² "In the Royal Academy," Works, p. 280.

³ "Ad Rosam," Works, p. 275.

⁴ "Incognita," Works, p. 270.

before he would leave to go woo at another gate¹; of the shepherd who would woo a shepherdess by tending her flock²; of a poet who changed his courting habits because Celia spurned him, only to have Delia make light of his new ways.³

Dobson pictured the fickleness of young ladies without calling them fickle. Ogden Nash is more blunt: he calls his young ladies as changeable as April; but he loves them anyway.⁴ Courting does not wait on comfort and convenience and pleasantness: if he has got to suffer hot, humid weather, he might as well feel prickly next to his love as feel prickly away from her.⁵ If his true love jilts him, he will wish a pox on her bridegroom, on her parents, on the bishop that marries her, but not on her.⁶ Nash, too, writes of the girl who leads a young man on⁷ and of the young man glad that he is rid of one young lady without any dire consequences so that he can move on to the next.⁸

¹"Extremum Tanain," Works, p. 336.

²"An April Pastoral," Works, p. 298.

³"A Love-Song," Works, p. 299.

⁴"Always Marry an April Girl," Verses from 1929 on, p. 388.

⁵"Summer Seranade," Verses, p. 327.

⁶"Lines To Be Mumbled at Ovington's," Verses, p. 35.

⁷"For Any Improbable She," Hard Lines (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1931), p. 58.

⁸"Hymn to the Sun and Myself," Hard Lines, p. 63.

Though he would court in spite of the summer heat, he recognizes with all the romantics of all time that spring is the time for love, and he has his "passionate pagan" call out to the "dispassionate public" in the spring:

Let our primitive urges
Disgruntle our clergies.¹

In Walker Gibson's verse there is courting at the drive-in movie:

There we'll languish with the others,
Boys with girls without their mothers,²

and at the automobile show. If he cannot get a girl, he can always buy love in the automobile showroom:

Look at that baby! What lines! What smart style!
• • • • • • • • • • • •
Look at that long smooth body, pink and cream!³

Closely allied to the institution of courtship is gallantry. Writers like to write light verses to particular women praising their beauty and charm. Dobson compliments many of his ladies by singing of the roses that blush in their lily white cheeks. He would not trade his shy, simple Phyllida for all the "Ladies of St. James's" and

¹"The Passionate Pagan and the Dispassionate Public," Happy Days (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1933), p. 93.

²"Love Song for a Drive-in Movie," Come As You Are, p. 53.

³"Love Among the Cadillacs," Reckless Spenders, p. 60.

their satins and grand phrases.¹ In the courtly love tradition in "A Flower Song of Angiola,"² he praises his lady who has a heavenly quality that gives him strength and hope. He sings "Of His Mistress,"³ who is incomparable in charm, wisdom, color, and physique; and of "Rose, in the Hedgerow Grown" that reminds him of his Rose, his love.⁴ Nash and Gibson are not of so gallant an age as Dobson was, and they have written less gallant verse. Nash pays tribute to his wife in several Valentine verses, in one of which he calls her the subject for the Shakespearian sonnet that never got written and which would have been the best sonnet of all.⁵ In "The Secret Town" he calls his lady a haven of peace and rest that he retreats to from his busy, nerve-shattering world.⁶

As of courtship and gallantry, so it is of marriage in light verse with Dobson writing in "The Honeymoon"⁷ of the misgivings and the attempts to convince the new spouse of the sincerity of declarations of love, the finality of

¹Works, p. 145. ²Ibid., p. 128.

³Ibid., p. 300. ⁴Ibid., p. 390.

⁵"The Winner," Marriage Lines: Notes of a Student Husband (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1964), p. 102.

⁶Many Long Years Ago, p. 116.

⁷Works, p. 373.

marriage; commenting on the marriage of opposites--a scholar and a socialite--in a "Story from a Dictionary"¹; and writing a congratulatory verse "To the Earl of Crewe on His Marriage," which praises the duo of Love.² Nash devotes one of his books of verse to the theme: Marriage Lines: Notes of a Student Husband.³ He praises wedded bliss in "The Anniversary" and "Confessions To Be Traced on a Birthday Cake." He satirizes the marital state in "I Do, I Will, I Have," calling it the state in which the irresistible force meets the immovable object. He describes some foibles that are particularly irritating to wives and some that are particularly irritating to husbands (though there are more of the second than of the first).

Welding together courtship, gallantry, and marriage is love. Dobson wrote in "Cupid's Alley"⁴ on how anyone can dance to Love: the young, the old, the rich, the poor, the well, the sick, the single, the wed, the good, the bad; in "Love in Winter"⁵ on how love can come any time of the year; in "Love's Farewell"⁶ on how love never leaves us. Nash, belonging to a generation exposed to Hollywood love, writes in a "Sedative Reflection" of how "love conquers all."⁷ He

¹Works, p. 251. ²Ibid., p. 380.

³See, pp. 82, 21, 19. ⁴Works, p. 94.

⁵Ibid., p. 74. ⁶Ibid., p. 391.

⁷Verses from 1929 on, p. 6.

speaks of the "Hemingway kind of love that Gregory Peck makes to Joan Bennet."¹ In "Love for Sale," he wishes poets and dramatists would quit talking about love so much; he is sick of it.² Yet, he loves his valentine "more than a wasp can sting," "more than a grapefruit squirts."³ In "Nothing But Nature," he takes a page from the sentimental novel and tells how the very sun itself is either bright or cloudy according to his relationship to his love.⁴ In his verses, Nash leaves the impression that he is in favor of love, but he attacks the kinds of love that are of the Hollywood kind. Walker Gibson satirizes the commercialization of love in "Love Among the Cadillacs," sings the "Love-Song for a Drive-In Movie," and in a poem entitled simply "Love" writes of the "old-fool fervor" that unexpectedly catches one who is through with love forever.⁵ Gibson, however, is the exception to the rule that the favorite topic of light verse writers is amour.

The risqué element in the discussion of love was carefully avoided by Dobson. Gibson, in "Vivre Est Un Mal,"

¹"Roll On, Thou Deep and Dark Blue Copy-Writer, Roll!" Verses from 1929 on, p. 378.

²Many Long Years Ago, p. 259.

³"To My Valentine," Marriage Lines, p. 72.

⁴Verses from 1929 on, p. 113.

⁵Come As You Are, p. 31.

says he wishes he could have been

A poet like Charles Baudelaire,
 Enjoying all that luscious sin,

 Playing around with Jeanne Duval.¹

Ogden Nash, sometimes delightfully risqué, quips about the fertile turtle² and wishes the best of luck to the nation's unwed mothers.³ He mourns the fact that today's vamps depend more on "pectoral exposure" and "brazenly stacked decks" than they do on atmosphere and make-up.⁴ He notes the Spaniardess's fear of ruined virtue in "These Latins":

The bashful Spaniardess apparently finds the amorous Spaniard so menacing to her virtue That she has to employ a duenna so that he shan't duennacing to her virtue.⁵

Women have their place in the verse of all three writers. Dobson had his fluffy, superficial young ladies like "Une Marquise"⁶ and his natural, rosy-cheeked milkmaid that he planned to marry on Easter.⁷ Gibson has his airline

¹Come As You Are, p. 28.

²"The Turtle," Verses from 1929 on, p. 81.

³"Birth Comes to the Archbishop," Verses, p. 92.

⁴Everyone But Thee and Me (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1962), p. 13.

⁵Hard Lines, p. 93. ⁶Works, p. 21.

⁷"The Milkmaid," Works, p. 166.

stewardess with the intimate look¹ and his "lovely black-amoor," Jeanne Duval.² Nash has his "who can figure them out?" females. He wonders at the way women open their cigarette packages³; at the wife who would rather be late to the theatre than carry a bag that does not match her outfit exactly⁴; at a woman's ideas about shopping:

Woman's idea is to have everything she has never needed sent home and then figure out what to do with it.⁵

Women, who are a favorite topic for most writers, including Dobson and Nash, Gibson just mentions in passing.

Since the time of Horace, verse writers have used social types as topics for light verse. In "To Q. H. F." Dobson tells Horace that the world has not changed much since he left.

. . . how strange! Our 'world,' today,
Tried in the scale, would scarce outweigh
Your Roman cronies;
Walk in the Park--you'll seldom fail
To find a Sybaris on the rail
By Lydia's ponies,
Or hap on Barrus, wigged and stayed,
Ogling some unsuspecting maid.

¹"Flight (First Class) of Walker Gibson," Come, p. 10.

²"Vivre Est Un Mal," Come As You Are, p. 28.

³"Thoughts After a Bridge Party," Verses, p. 346.

⁴"How To Harry a Husband or Is That Accessory Really Necessary?" Verses from 1929 on, p. 346.

⁵"Just Wrap It Up, And I'll Throw It Away Later," Verses from 1929 on, p. 325.

The great Gargilius, then, behold!
 His 'long-bow' hunting tales of old
 Are now but duller;
 Fair Neobule too! Is not
 One Hebrus here--from Aldershot?
 Aha, you color!
 Be wise. There old Canidia sits;
 No doubt she's tearing you to bits.

And look, dyspeptic, brave, and kind,
 Comes dear Maecenas, half behind
 Terentia's skirting;
 Here's Pyrrha, 'golden haired' at will:
 Prig Damasippus, preaching still;
 Asterie flirting,--
 Radiant, of course. We'll make her black,--
 Ask her when Gyges' ship comes back.

So with the rest. Who will may trace
 Behind the new each elder face
 Defined as clearly;
 Science proceeds, and man stands still;
 Our 'world' to-day's as good or ill,--
 As cultured (nearly),--
 As yours was, Horace! You alone,
 Unmatched, unmet, we have not known.¹

The various social types that served as subjects for Horace's verses also serve for Dobson, Nash, and Gibson. Horace's famous bore is still with us, and both Dobson and Nash describe him. Dobson tells of his bore in "The Ballad of the Bore"²: a garrulous poet catches him and he cannot get away. Nash's bore is the one who should not be, the one who has been around enough to be interesting:

¹Works, p. 88.

²Ibid., p. 370.

I know another man who is an expert on everything from witchcraft and demonology to the Elizabethan drama,

And he has spent a week end with the Dalai Lama,
And substituted for a mongoose in a fight with a cobra,
and performed a successful underwater appendectomy,
And I cannot tell you how tediously his reminiscences affect me.¹

Another social type is the drunkard: Dobson compares his to a maltworm in "The Maltworm's Madrigal"²; Nash's is compared to a toddler full of milk in "It Must Be the Milk."³ The clergy found a place on Horace's social ladder in the "prig Damasippus, preaching still." Dobson and Nash also write on the clergy, but in different ways: Dobson describes "The Cure's Progress" as being a gentle path through life with a kind stop for everyone⁴; Nash thinks that "The Pulpiteers Have Hairy Ears"; they see evil in too much:

In fact the world is so full of a number of amusing things

That 25% of its ministers seem to be as unhappy as ex-kings.⁵

Further character types described by Dobson are the country squire come to town in "The 'Squire at Vauxhall"⁶; the

¹"Will You Have Your Tedium Rare or Medium," Verses from 1929 on, p. 367.

²Works, p. 297. ³Verses, p. 41.

⁴Works, p. 150. ⁵Hard Lines, p. 65.

⁶Works, p. 233.

dilettante,

One of those Mushroom Growths that spring
From Grand Tours and from tailoring;¹

the hungry artist who writes or draws to please the crowd rather than the Muse and gains more success than he asked for, namely, a rabble-rousing following²; and the Autocrat in "An Old Fish Pond,"

. . . tough old tyrant, wrinkle-jawed,
To whom the sky, the earth,
Have but for aim to look on awed
And see him wax in girth.³

Nash adds to the list of social types. The practical prankster who liked to squirt people in the eye with his boutonnière met his death when a rope tied around his waist broke while he was being lowered from a hotel roof to the window of the nuptial suite with a pair of cymbals in his hands.⁴ The smutty joke teller in "King Leer" is "risquéting on thin ice."⁵ The cruise director in "A Day on a Cruise" is as grimly jolly as Marley's specter.⁶ The

¹"The Dilettant," Works, p. 228.

²"The Successful Author," Works, p. 226.

³Works, p. 168.

⁴"What's the Matter, Haven't You Got Any Sense of Humor?" Verses from 1929 on, p. 107.

⁵Verses, p. 39.

⁶Everyone, p. 112.

politician, represented in "Invocation" by "Senator Smoot (Republican, Ut.)," "is planning a ban on smut."¹ Golfers are "arrogant, insolent, supercilious," "uppity, hoity-toity, biliary."² Other social types that Nash mentions are unwelcome house guests, gluttons, literary sophisticates, and millionaires who complain about their money.

A typical social character described by both Nash and Gibson is the professor. Nash tells of the absent-minded professor Primrose, the Nobel Prize winning Harvard lecturer who could never remember to shave both sides of his face and who instead of enrolling at the Pelman institute became a porter:

"Good Lawd, Maria," the porter said, "good Lawd! Did you say Pelman? Ah wrote to de Pullman folks!"³

Gibson describes in "The American Scholar Abroad" the good times that Guggenheim fellows have abroad pursuing scholarship in Switzerland in May.⁴ Gibson's "Gent" presents the social character who cannot resist writing his name on the restroom wall.⁵

¹Verses from 1929 on, p. 37.

²"Who Taught Caddies to Count," Verses, p. 362.

³"The Mind of Professor Primrose," Verses, p. 79.

⁴Come As You Are, p. 29.

⁵Reckless Spenders, p. 44.

Another topic that appeals to writers of light verse is time. Austin Dobson liked to look back in time and recall youthful loves: three in "Pot-Pourri"¹ and one who wore a bit of lace in "A Gage d'Amour."² He wrote of the paradox of time: the paradox is that time does not go; we do.³ Another paradox of time is that the beauty of the rose lasts a short time,⁴ but daffodils last forever.⁵ The beauty of the flowers has a short season, but the season is ever returning. That which is new and beautiful now has been new and beautiful through the ages. In "New and Old" he spoke of the value of old things. The "sun that gilds your hair" is ancient, but its age does not impair it.⁶ The Horatian carpe diem theme is evident also in his "A Fancy from Fontanelle" and in "Tu ne Quaesieris": let us enjoy the now; we do not know when we will have to go.⁷ In "A Roman Round-Robin" he chides Horace for reminding us so often of the passing of time.⁸ He speaks of the gleaners after time, the people who like to save things from the past,

¹Works, p. 75.

²Ibid., p. 92.

³"The Paradox of Time," Works, p. 116.

⁴"A Fancy from Fontanelle," Works, p. 198.

⁵"To Daffodils," Works, p. 330. ⁶Works, p. 476.

⁷Ibid., p. 339. ⁸Ibid., p. 182.

in "A Ballad of Antiquaries."¹ In "Leal Souvenir" he says he is glad that time cannot take away memories.² In "The Prodigals" he asks for his yesterdays back.³ In "The Old Sedan Chair," he tells of the way times have changed.⁴ He likes the slower pace of time in earlier centuries; we write too fast, now.⁵ In "To Time, The Tyrant" he says, "I am old, but at least let me watch and advise youth."⁶ Like Horace, Dobson saw the elements of time as unique: a second of time never returns in the same way; it is like a "Snap Shot" that cannot be duplicated. Once a second is past, it is gone forever.⁷

The Horatian carpe diem theme is not so prevalent in Ogden Nash's verse, but there is an occasional echo of it. Nash chides a lady playing solitaire for wasting time on painted faces:

Wine keeps not ever in the cup,
Music is mortal, comes a day
When the musicians will not play.⁸

In "Remembrance of Things To Come," he tells his five-year-old daughter that she had better enjoy him now, because

¹Works, p. 392. ²Ibid., p. 333. ³Ibid., p. 340.

⁴Ibid., p. 147.

⁵"On the Hurry of This Time," Works, p. 331.

⁶Works, p. 442. ⁷Ibid., p. 406.

⁸"To a Lady Passing Time Better Left Unpassed,"
Verses from 1929 on, p. 182.

when she is seventeen, she will want to hide him:

What am I doing, daughter mine?
 A-haying while the sun doth shine;
 Gathering rosebuds while I may
 To hoard against a barren day;
 Reveling in the brief sensation
 Of basking in your admiration.
 Oh, now, when you are almost five
 I am the lordliest man alive;

 But almost five can't last forever,
 And wide-eyed girls grow tall and clever
 Few creatures others less admire
 Than a lass of seventeen her sire.¹

He echoes Herrick's passage with "Gathering rose-buds while I may." Nash, too, shows the paradox of time: on the one hand, he points out the brevity of youth; on the other hand, he asks a lady bewailing her thirtieth birthday, "How old is Spring, Miranda?"² Spring is brief; spring is eternal. When speaking of things eternal, Nash is more likely to be speaking of the long waits of husbands on wives than of the timelessness of spring. "I'm Sure She Said Six-Thirty" is a good excuse for a criminal hanging around an alley to give to an inquisitive policeman.³ "It's About Time" is the plaint uttered by the husband of the female owner of eleven watches, all lying on the

¹ Many Long Years Ago, p. 108.

² "A Lady Thinks She Is Thirty," Verses, p. 42.

³ Verses, p. 292.

dressing table.¹ Time moves slowly for husbands of late wives; time moves on for Mr. Migg:

The years are crawling over him
Like wee red ants.²

Time is moving in the wrong direction for Nash: things are supposed to be easier in this generation, but one has to be a graduate of M. I. T. in order to play one Little Golden Record.³ Time is something to be saved: in his effort to save time, Mr. Artesian jumped out the window instead of taking the elevator.⁴ Time is something that repeats itself. People who get excited on New Year's Eve, thinking that their lives will be better in the New Year, are in for a disappointment.

Every new year is a country as barren as the old one, and it's no use trying to forage it; Every new year is incorrigible; then all I can say is for Heaven's sakes, why go out of your way to incorrage it?⁵

Time is something to be killed when responsibilities need to be

¹Verses, p. 458. ²"The Party," Verses, p. 11.

³"Come, Come, Kerouac! My Generation Is Beater Than Yours," Everyone But Thee and Me, p. 11.

⁴"Mr. Artesian's Conscientiousness," Verses, p. 69.

⁵"Good-By, Old Year, You Oaf or Why Don't They Pay the Bonus?" Verses, p. 99.

met.¹ Time receives more ribbing at the hands of Nash than at the hands of Dobson.

Walker Gibson speaks of the passing of time: "In time the snowman always dies."² Time is the only thing that can cure "Spring Fever,"³ but Gibson doubts whether time is after all "The Great Healer" because

. . . permanent is pain,
And . . . a joy can take forever.⁴

He notices the passing of time every year when he goes to "The Game,"⁵ and he sings an off-key "Blues for an Old Blue" at the class reunion.⁶ He sees the passing of time in his "Essay on a Photo Album." The pictures reveal a past he would just as soon forget.⁷ He would let his personal past be, but he points out that our civilization is built on the past. A nation, like a "garden," sprouts, flourishes, decays; "We're fertilized on the compost of the past."⁸

Another topic that appeals to writers of light verse is literary criticism. Dobson, Nash, and Gibson are all students of their craft and have definite ideas about the

¹"Procrastination Is All of the Time," Verses, p. 43.

²"Thaw," Reckless Spenders, p. 33.

³Reckless Spenders, p. 68. ⁴Come As You Are, p. 24.

⁵Ibid., p. 50. ⁶Reckless Spenders, p. 46.

⁷Ibid., p. 20. ⁸Ibid., p. 76.

way in which verse should be written, the kinds of comments critics should make, and the rewards of being a poet. In "The Metamorphosis" Dobson has an Abbé write a verse and a poet rewrite it. The Abbé's verse is wordy, full of extraneous material, "furiously classical" with a mixture of classical terms and current terms that are most unbecoming. The poet's version is brief, to the point, with a more "poetic" word order.¹ In "Ars Victrix," which is an imitation of the French writer Théophile Gautier, Dobson echoes Horace. The harder a work is to do, the better it is. Good work demands the "labour of the file."² In "The Carver and the Caliph," he presents two men who agree that true artistry in design does not sell as well as larger than life and plain designs. To be rich, one must give up art and cater to the popular demand.³ "The Successful Author" already mentioned has a similar experience. "To the Mammoth-Tortoise" points out that one of the duties of the poet is to help change man's greedy ways.⁴ "Jocasa Lyra" tells us that light verse

¹Works, p. 38. ²Ibid., p. 141.

³Ibid., p. 159. ⁴Ibid., p. 181.

. . . will last till men weary of pleasure
 In measure!
 It will last till men weary of laughter i . .
 And after!¹

Dobson writes of form and sense, of inspiration, of eighteenth-century poets, of the future of poetry, of himself as a poet, of the lack of good verse in his own time, of reviewers and critics. He attacks critics in "The 'Squire at Vauxhall": the 'squire

. . . praised the Thing he understood;
 'Twere well if every Critic would.²

The tersest of Nash's literary criticism is

Philo Vance
 Needs a kick in the pance.³

He deplores the "Had I but known" style of detective writing in "Don't Guess, Let Me Tell You."⁴ In "The Literary Scene" he deprecates the prevalence of such words as "ambivalence" and "dichotomy" in scholarly journals.⁵ In "Very Like A Whale" he derides metaphors and similes, especially "the Assyrian came down like a wolf on the fold." He wonders why things cannot be what they are and not like something else.⁶ He also wonders why people cannot leave

¹Works, p. 193. ²Ibid., p. 233.

³"Literary Reflection," Verses, p. 64.

⁴Verses, p. 104. ⁵Ibid., p. 490.

⁶Ibid., p. 23.

well enough alone. In "Very Nice, Rembrandt, But How About A Little More Color?" he rues the attempts to update the King James Bible, Shakespeare, and Cole Porter lyrics.¹ He, too, jibes the critics: he warns regular poets that they will starve to death because the six-year-old poets and the eighty-eight-year-old poets receive all the critical acclaim.² As for a critique of light verse, he says

. . . do not spoil your present laughter
By trying to analyze it after.³

Walker Gibson has a few words to offer as a literary critic. In an "Epistle to William Wimsatt," he discusses rhyme as similar to a picture frame or a dancer's gestures or the dress of the Muse.

Rhyme's not Surprise, of course. How very tame
To know the next line always ends the same.
A faucet's drops have their relationship
But who's surprised to hear the next drop drip?⁴

He likes being a poet: he likes having his name on the title-page of a book.⁵ In "Epistle to the Reader" he

¹ Saturday Review, XLIX (August 13, 1966), 4.

² "A Parable for Sports Writers, Society Columnists, Bond Salesmen, and Poets, or Go Get A Reputation," Verses, p. 135.

³ I Couldn't Help Laughing, Foreword.

⁴ Reckless Spenders, p. 72.

⁵ "Personalized," ibid., p. 58.

speaks of the money he is not making while writing poems.¹

He would have to like being a poet because there are no material rewards in being one.

Printing is one of Dobson's favorite topics for verse. He writes of the frustration of the necessity of an errata sheet because someone failed to cross a "t." "Such things would make the angels weep."² "The Passionate Printer to His Love" describes Amanda in printer's terms: if Amanda "flouts" his suit, he will just change the name by changing the type.³ "The Happy Printer" knows the "types of men, and all the world of letters." "His argument is proof."⁴

One of Nash's favorite categories in his verse is natural history. He writes brief epigrammatic verse on insects, fish, mammals, birds, and vegetables. He discusses their mating habits, eating habits, habitat, relations to human beings. He and Gibson have both written lines on the wasp. Nash says:

The wasp and all his numerous family
I look upon as a major calamity.
He throws open his nest with prodigality,
But I distrust his waspitality.⁵

¹Reckless Spenders, p. 57.

²"Errata: An Eclogue," Works, p. 473.

³Works, p. 412. ⁴Ibid., p. 423.

⁵"The Wasp," Verses, p. 336.

Gibson writes:

The wasp is known to build its nest
 For young that it will never see.
 Some instinct in its narrow breast
 Keeps it doing its witless best
 For its unborn posterity.
 Could that be true with you and me
 By some design analogous?
 Do we build better than we know
 Mysterious Nature forcing us,
 Through all our fluster, fuss, and muss
 To somehow pay the debts we owe
 Our children's children? May be so
 And all is well--but then again
 Wasps may not be the same as men.¹

Another of Nash's frequent topics is frustrations or "pet peeves." He writes of the horror he has of people who take cold water showers first thing in the morning.² He wishes there were not so many special occasion days and so many advertising men thinking up so many special occasion days.³ He hates frozen lettuce⁴ or any kind of sweet dressing for lettuce.⁵ Songs that are played on the radio

¹"The Wasp," Come As You Are, p. 24.

²"Tell It to the Eskimos or Tell It to the Esquimaux," Verses, p. 84.

³"Please Leave Father Alone," "Remember the Old Folks at Home," Many Long Years Ago, pp. 235, 298.

⁴"Iceberg Lettuce," Everyone But Thee and Me, p. 120.

⁵"My Dear, How Did You Think Up This Delicious Salad?" Verses, p. 128.

over and over he can do without.¹ He is especially impatient with people who refuse to stay home with colds.²

The subject matter for some light verse is nonsensical. The writer can choose for his topic some ludicrous idea, according to J. Berg Essenwein and Mary Eleanor Roberts,³ which is at the same time plausible, adds Max Eastman,⁴ and which has a general appeal, says Auden.⁵ "Geddondillo"⁶ by Nash with its "sharrot," "dorlim," and "guzzard" is similar to "Jabberwocky." Nash's "A Boy Is a Boy" is nonsensical to the extent that it is a tale told by a dog.⁷

Subject matter for light verse is chosen on the whole from the life and times of the writer. The topics are drawn from the surface of contemporary life; they are the nonponderous material of living.

¹"When the Moon Shines Over and Over," Happy Days, p. 15.

²"Winter Complaint," Many Long Years Ago, p. 384.

³See n. 1, p. 4, for The Art of Versification (1920), p. 255.

⁴Enjoyment of Laughter (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1936), p. 62.

⁵P. ix.

⁶Family Reunion (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1951), p. 136.

⁷A Boy Is A Boy (New York: Franklin Watts, Inc., 1960), p. 1.

CHAPTER III

STYLE

Just as there are topics characteristic of light verse, there are styles appropriate to light verse. We define them in terms of the individuality of the author, the ideas that he chooses to express, and the ways in which he chooses to express them.¹ The style of the writer of light verse, however, is not only governed by his individuality, his content, and his manner but also by the fact that he is writing "light" verse. His way of expressing himself is influenced by conventions and acceptable practices as well as by his own unique combinations and adaptations of these practices. His style is realized in genre, tone, language, metrics, and versification.

Genres

Perhaps the oldest of the types of light verse is satire. Light satire is characterized by a "gentle,

¹William Flint Thrall, Addison Hibbard, and C. Hugh Holman, A Handbook to Literature (Rev.; New York: The Odyssey Press, 1960), p. 474.

urbane, smiling" exposure of human folly and foibles for the purpose of improving the human lot.¹ The light satirist does not expose the vices of his fellows for the purpose of laughing at them but for the purpose of laughing with them; he does not criticize them because he dislikes them but because he understands and sympathizes with them. The light satirist feels a warm kinship with his comrades in humanity. He knows life, especially the weaker aspects of human nature, and he represents this life in his verse. Because he is a faithful observer, he is controlled and restrained by his observations; he cannot indulge in flights of fancy or imagination but must be true to life.² Geoffrey Bullough says "satire, like all other art, creates a world of its own, related through the poet's mind to the ordinary world, but complete in itself. The true satirist is a myth-maker."³ He says that the satirist's imagination is distinguished from other artists' imaginations in being partial and personal: the satirist must make a judgment

¹ Thrall, Hibbard, Holman, p. 437.

² J. Wight Duff, Roman Satire: Its Outlook on Social Life (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1936), p. 7.

³ The Trend of Modern Poetry (3rd ed.; Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1949), p. 106.

about life and men.¹ An example of using a make-believe situation to point out a real weakness of men is in Walker Gibson's poem "Camouflage." Gibson discusses satirically the efforts of a monocle factory on the northeastern seaboard to camouflage itself by building a farm on its roof.

See how the silo holds the rural crop,
A factory chimney belching from its top!
See how the sunlight strikes, across the field,
The anti-aircraft, cleverly concealed!²

The reader's first reaction is to wonder why a monocle factory would ever need to be camouflaged. The dramatic situation in the poem is an improbability; but the judgment is there. The word "monocle" connotes the stuffy, self-important individual who is as ridiculously sure of his importance as the monocle factory owners were sure of theirs. Gibson with his ridiculous story causes us to smile, but we realize that he understands the feelings of self-importance which we have from time to time. He faithfully represents reality in a make-believe situation. He smilingly exposes folly.

Satire is both constructive and destructive. It stings and amuses at the same time; it instructs and is

¹Bullough, p. 106.

²Reckless Spenders, p. 74.

constructive; it shows the noble beside the petty, suffering and sorrow beside the reprehensible and ludicrous; it shows charity for human failings; and it represents a philosophy of life.¹ It is both positive and negative. Robert C. Elliot speaks of it in terms of the Satirist versus the Adversarius.² The adversary impels the satirist to speak, to expose vice and folly to critical analysis, to expose the adversary as abhorrent or ridiculous. Then the satirist takes the positive approach, makes an appeal, either explicit or implicit, to "virtue and rational behavior--to a norm, against which the vicious and the foolish are to be judged."³ The negative function is to ridicule the departure from virtue; the positive function is to indicate a way to return to normal. In "I Know You'll Like Them," by Ogden Nash, we see two sides of the human picture, the actual and the ideal. The poet plans an informal gathering to introduce out-of-town friends to home-town friends. He envisions conversations on universal subjects such as music or police work but finds that

¹Duff, p. 9.

²"Satire," Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics, p. 738.

³Ibid.

. . . if there is one thing in which every
 body's home-team friends are unerring,
 It is to confine their conversation to mutual
 acquaintances and episodes as to which
 your visiting friends have no idea of to
 what they are referring.

Most people are only vocal
 When talking local.¹

Judgment and ridicule are summed up in the last lines;
 but the poet has earlier given an indication of the way
 things ought to be. The sting is there, but it is softened
 by the ridiculous metrics. The philosophy of life is im-
 plied: the brotherhood of man includes those people from
 outside our "fair" town.

Because satire is a representation of man's follies,
 it, according to Bullough, is "the most deliberately social
 of the kinds" of literature.² Because it is social in
 nature, says Bullough further, it suffers from changes in
 public taste,³ lack of durability being a factor in light
 verse.

Another genre that has been with us since classical
 times is the parody. Charles W. Cooper defines a parody as
 a "poem mimicking the language, style, or ideas of another
 poem, for comic or satiric effect."⁴ Max Eastman sees
 danger in the parody: it is easy, can be done by a mediocre

¹Verses from 1929 on, p. 47.

²P. 106

³P. 105. ⁴P. 716.

poet, and is a parasite among the arts. He would have it justify itself by bearing "some blooms of independent truth or humor."¹ Essenwein and Roberts agree that parody must have something more than just imitation: "Bright parody always retains something of the original flavor while it wittily turns aside to produce either merited ridicule or wholesome fun."² Louis Untermeyer says parody must balance itself between creation and criticism; it must ridicule without being ridiculous. He sees it as a subtle but sympathetic form of criticism, "a criticism which is also the sincerest form of flattery."³ Good parody must be more than imitation.

Carolyn Wells divides parody into three classes: word-rendering, form-rendering, and sense-rendering. Parody that is "word-rendering" repeats most of the same words of the original work, but with a few changes here and there to give the parody a more commonplace or even trivial meaning than the original.⁴ In this manner Ogden Nash parodies William Blake's "Tyger, Tyger":

¹Pp. 157-158. ²P. 246.

³Play in Poetry (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1938), p. 75.

⁴Miss Wells' three forms of parody are cited by Essenwein and Roberts, p. 245.

Beggar, beggar, burning low
 In the city's trodden snow,
 What immortal hand or eye
 Could frame thy dread asymmetry?

In what distant deep of lies
 Died the fire of thine eyes?
 What the mind that planned the shame?
 What the hand dare quench the flame?

And what shoulder and what art
 Could rend the sinews of thy heart?
 And when thy heart began to fail,
 What soft excuse, what easy tale?

What the hammer? What the chain?
 What the furnace dulled thy brain?
 What the anvil? What the blow
 Dare to forge this deadly woe?

When the business cycle ends
 In flaming extra dividends,
 Will He smile his work to see?
 Did He who made the Ford make thee?¹

In parody that is "form-rendering," the style of
 the author is imitated. Austin Dobson writes of Don
 Quixote by using the kind of language that Cervantes might
 have put into the knight's mouth:

Behind thy pasteboard, on thy battered hack
 Thy lean cheek striped with plaster to and fro,
 Thy long spear levelled at the unseen foe.
 And doubtful Sancho trudging at thy back,
 Thou wert a figure strange enough, good lack!²

¹"The Beggar, Happy Days, p. 65.

²"Don Quixote," Works, p. 199.

In parody that is "sense-rendering," the parodist not only uses the style and diction of the original writer but also "follows a train of thought precisely along the lines that [the original writer] would have pursued from the given premises."¹ Dobson uses the style and diction and ideas of such poets as Horace and Robert Herrick, but he does not do so to satirize or to ridicule. He is more the imitator than the parodist. Frank Sidgwick has written a poem about Dobson, parodying the style if not the train of thought that Walt Whitman might have used.

Imaginary Correspondence
Walt Whitman to Austin Dobson

I who have walked splay-footed in hobnailed boots,
 I who have written at large in sesquipedalian lines,
 I am eager for juxtaposition of mutual antagonisms.
 The formule of splay-footedness is the formule of
 sesquipedalian lines;
 But your formule, camerado, is the formule of
 varnished pumps and minuets;
 You have minced through life, minion camerado,
 You have minced with Q. Horatius Flaccus, Proverbs
 in Porcelain, Beaux in Brocade, and
 Roses in Bonnets.
 Juxtapose yourself, I beg;
 Exude me the efflux of your eighteenth-century soul;
 Lilt me a lyric, lisp in numbers, curt and compt;
 Exude to me, minion to monster, pump to hobnail;
 By return mail exude!²

¹Miss Wells as cited by Essenwein and Roberts, p. 245.

²Cited by David McCord. See n. 2, p. 1, for What Cheer (1945), p. 455.

Essenwein and Roberts add a fourth class to Miss Wells' list: the semi-parody. The parodist begins with the exact words of the original and ends with something quite different. Nash's "Song of the Open Road" is a good example:

I think that I shall never see
 A billboard lovely as a tree.
 Indeed, unless the billboards fall
 I'll never see a tree at all.¹

Parody carried to extremes may become burlesque.

Burlesque is ridiculous exaggeration. It differs from parody in that it usually ridicules a literary form rather than a particular work. The most distinguishing characteristic of burlesque, according to Thrall, Hibbard, and Holman, is the "discrepancy between subject-matter and style."² A poet may use a style ordinarily used for serious subject-matter to discuss a frivolous topic or vice versa. Robert P. Falk adds that burlesque is "incongruous imitation and deflationary treatment of serious themes for satiric purposes."³ Nash burlesques the style of "a minor literary figure" by using the figure's overwhelming combination of colloquial expressions with formal

¹ Verses from 1929 on, p. 65. ² P. 66.

³ "Burlesque," Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics, p. 88.

words to describe his very bland life.

. . . when the reticent New Hampshire soil
Reluctant yields me one small oblong of non-
breathing space
There will be none to grind my bones to make
their bread,
.
To cram the public maw with spiteful hearsay
Authenticate only by vociferous claim to
intimacy,
To friendship, good fellowship, and unique
piquant revelations
Garnered over the rum pot.¹

Both burlesque and parody may be travesty, the presentation of a serious subject frivolously.² In "The Souvenir Hunters," Nash describes the death of seven men who apparently crashed in an airplane. The last two lines of his poem are a complete reversal of the spirit of the first part; they are a travesty.

Seven gallant gentlemen
Laid their good lives down--
There ain't been nothing like it
Since the circus come to town!³

Another type of light verse is the epigram. Usually brief, according to Hudson, the greatest number in English poetry consist of six lines or fewer with couplets and quatrains predominating. The form is limitless.⁴ Untermeyer

¹"The Nonbiography of a Nobody," Saturday Review, XLX (April 1, 1967), 8.

²Thrall, Hibbard, Holman, p. 494.

³Happy Days, p. 150. ⁴P. 19.

would add that the form must be perfect; the epigram must be swift, incisive, with every word counting, every syllable carefully balanced, every rhyme sharply matched; no fumbling, no superfluous ideas, no excess: all essence.¹ Whipple tells us that the epigram is a flexible and adaptable form; it reflects literary fashion and taste and is a prolific literary form. The first part is preliminary exposition, setting the tone or the occasion or giving information. The second part is the conclusion, containing a maximum of surprise which is instantaneous.² In the following poem "The Pig," by Nash, we can see the two parts:

The pig, if I am not mistaken,
Supplies us sausage, ham, and bacon.
Let others say his heart is big--
I call it stupid of the pig.³

The first two lines describe the pig. In the third line the poet changes from description to judgment, and in the last line by turning on the pig so suddenly, he brings the reader up sharply to an unexpected ending. The reader has been led to believe the poet is praising pigs; even the third-line judgment is kind to them. But the last line

¹Doorways to Poetry (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1938), p. 299.

²Pp. 279-283.

³Verses from 1929 on, p. 20.

is a complete reversal, an unexpected twist, an instantaneous surprise.

The two major variations of the epigram are described in the following verse by the German poet Klopstock:

At times an epigram shoots arrow-wise
 Its point--to pierce;
At other times it wears the saber's guise
 And slashes fierce:
Yet it is oft--the Greeks preferred it thus--
 A picture small,
A flash not sent to scorch, but luminous
 On life to fall.¹

The first variation mentioned is the Roman, especially the Martialian epigram, the epigram that is usually witty or satirical and that has a "sting in the tail." An example is Nash's "The Japanese":

How courteous is the Japanese;
He always says, "Excuse it, please."
He climbs into his neighbor's garden,
And smiles, and says, "I beg your pardon";
He bows and grins a friendly grin,
And calls his hungry family in;
He grins, and bows a friendly bow;
"So sorry, this my garden now."²

The second variation is the Greek epigram described by Mackail as "a very short poem summing up as though in a memorial inscription what it is desired to make permanently memorable in a single action or situation. It must have the compression and conciseness of a real inscription, and in proportion to the smallness of its bulk must be highly

¹Cited by Duff, p. 136.

²Verses from 1929 on, p. 172.

finished, evenly balanced, simple, and lucid."¹ Again I turn to Nash for an example, "Crossing the Border":

Senescence begins
And middle age ends
The day your descendants
Outnumber your friends.²

Epigrams are light verse because they are more "intellectual, rhetorical and conscious" than they are "emotional, poetic, and unconscious."³ They are intellectual because they display wit and because the achieving of compression and conciseness takes a kind of intellectual ingenuity on the part of the epigrammist. They are rhetorical because, as Schelling points out, they frequently have a persuasive purpose⁴ and because they employ rhetorical devices. They are conscious because they exist for a purpose.

Four different purposes of the epigram pointed out by Hudson are the satirical, the allusive, the sepulchral, and the adulatory or complimentary.⁵ The satirical epigram is a short, witty ridicule of folly; epigrammatic satire

¹Cited by Whipple, p. 281.

²Verses from 1929 on, p. 522.

³F. E. Schelling, cited by Hudson, p. 16.

⁴P. 17. ⁵Pp. 2-3.

is longer satirical verse ending with or containing witty couplets or quatrains. Walker Gibson writes epigrammatic satire. Some of his longer verses composed of many rhymed couplets have pointed endings, couplets with witty or wise comments or unexpected twists. The poem "Dump" is a description of a town dump where hunters shoot rats and where the rubbish keeps piling up

Until (they say) a mountainside of rubble
Is all we'll have to show for all our trouble.
Our end, it seems, is this gray funeral mound
Or (as you please) this happy hunting ground.¹

To call the town dump a happy hunting ground is rather ingenious and unexpected. Ogden Nash, too, writes epistles in verse with epigrammatic touches in them. He also writes satirical epigrams, as illustrated by "What's the Use?"

Sure, deck your lower limbs in pants;
Yours are the limbs, my sweeting,
You look divine as you advance--
Have you seen yourself retreating?²

Austin Dobson wrote in "The Forgotten Grave" of an uncared-for grave and in the last line gave the inscription on the tomb at the grave: "Tho' lost to Sight, to Mem'ry dear."³ With this line he shot a piercing arrow.

¹Reckless Spenders, p. 65.

²Verses from 1929 on, p. 103. ³Works, p. 108.

The allusive epigram comments on a person without directly naming him. Nash, for example, alludes to one Electra Thorne in "The Self-Effacement of Electra Thorne," but the description of Miss Thorne sounds very familiar. She had assured her husband

• • • that she did not wish her career to intrude upon their private life,
He was the artist in the family, she said,
and her only desire was to be a common, ordinary, everyday, just plain wife.¹

I believe the verse is really about Marilyn Monroe.

The sepulchral epigram is the epitaph, the direct ancestor of the epigram. The epitaph, of course, is a memorial inscription; and most epitaphs are light verse only in the sense that they are occasional verse. Unter-meyer tells us that they are more restricted and less pointed than the epigram proper since they concern themselves wholly with the dead. They are usually short and personal, they often serve as commentaries on men, and they are sometimes condensed criticism.² Comic epitaphs have had a limited vogue in our time. Nash has written a series of "Uncalled for Epitaphs" about prominent people in the thirties. One describes Will Rogers:

¹Verses from 1929 on, p. 506.

²Doorways, p. 303.

I worked with gum and grin and lariat
 To entertain the proletariat,
 And with my Oklahomely wit
 I brightened up the earth a bit.
 I'd brighten Heaven with my capers--
 But shucks, the Lord don't read the papers.¹

Austin Dobson wrote several epigrams with serious intent, but one of his has a touch of "tongue-in-cheek." The man who died had said that he had "rather be dead than praised."² Dobson in the epitaph promised not to praise him.

The adulatory or complimentary epigram is more characteristic of the pen of Austin Dobson than of the pens of modern poets. One of his is "To Arthur James Balfour":

Not to look down, or blanch, or care,
 But fearless still the foe to meet,
 And fearless still to do or dare--
 Ah! there are honours of defeat.³

Not all epigrams fit into the four categories mentioned. Some epigrams are proverbial, gnomic in character. Hudson calls them epigrams with sententious comments, epigrams with emphatic summaries or distillations.⁴ The following epigram, "Old Men" by Nash, expresses a human truth in the style of the Greek epigram:

¹Happy Days, p. 53.

²"Charles George Gordon," Works, p. 218.

³Works, p. 465. ⁴P. 4.

People expect old men to die,
 They do not really mourn old men.
 Old men are different. People look
 At them with eyes that wonder when . . .
 People watch with unshocked eyes;
 But the old men know when an old man dies.¹

Satire, parody, and epigram are classical forms that are popular with all writers of light verse. No longer fashionable are the French forms used by Austin Dobson. James Keith Robinson, writing in the Modern Language Quarterly in 1953, states that Dobson was the best English user of these forms, that he was one of the poets who naturalized French measures to English.² Dobson himself says of the French forms:

. . . the majority of the forms now in question are not at present suited for, nor are they intended to rival the more approved national rhythms in the treatment of grave or elevated themes. What is modestly advanced for them (by the present writer at least) is that they may add a new charm of buoyancy,--a lyric freshness,--to amatory and familiar verse, already too much condemned to faded measures and outworn cadences. Further, upon the assumption that merely graceful or tuneful trifles may be sometimes written (and even read), that they are admirable vehicles for the expression of trifles or jeux d'esprit.³

The rondeau, consisting of three stanzas or thirteen iambic lines of eight or ten syllables with only two rhymes, is a classical French form for wit and epigram and compliment.⁴ Its first and third stanzas have five lines each;

¹Verses from 1929 on, p. 94.

²Pp. 37, 39.

³Cited by Robinson, p. 37.

⁴Johnson, p. 305.

the second has three lines. The refrain consists of the first word or words of the first line added without rhyming to the last lines of the second and third stanzas. A regular rondeau rhymes a a b b a a a b a a b b a.¹ According to Robinson, Dobson, who tried some of the French forms only once, others a few times, apparently liked the rondeau best because nearly one half of his poems in a French form are rondeaux.² Brander Matthews calls his rondeaux, as illustrated here in "A Greeting," worthy of comparison with the sonnet³:

But once or twice we met, touched hands.
Today between us both expands
 A waste of tumbling waters wide,--
 A waste by me as yet untried,
 Vague with the doubt of unknown lands.

Time like a despot speeds his sands:
A year he blots, a day he brands;
 We walked, we talked by Thamis' side
 But once or twice.

What makes a friend? What filmy strands
Are these that turn to iron bands?
 What knot is this so firmly tied
 That naught but Fate can now divide?--
Ah, these are things one understands
 But once or twice!⁴

¹ Johnson, p. 305. ²P. 39.

³A Study of Versification (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1911), p. 156.

⁴Works, p. 332.

A. W. Ward and A. R. Waller say of the French forms that they may, loosely, be said to belong to the same general class as the sonnet, but are much more artificial in their structure; the keys of all being first the use, under more or less intricate laws, of the refrain, and the repetition of one or more lines at statutory intervals; and secondly, the observance of regularly recurrent rimes. The effect, especially when the poet is skillful enough to make this kind of carillon express sense as well as sound, is sometimes, extremely beautiful; but obviously, it is likely to become monotonous, tedious, and purely artificial.¹

In another French form, the rondel, Dobson succeeded better than any one else at making the English language fit the pattern,² as illustrated by "The Wanderer":

Love comes back to his vacant dwelling,--
The old, old Love that we knew of yore!
We see him stand by the open door,
With his great eyes sad, and his bosom swelling.

He makes as though in our arms repelling,
He fain would lie as he lay before;--
Love comes back to his vacant dwelling,--
The old, old Love that we knew of yore!

Ah, who shall help us from over-spelling
That sweet forgotten, forbidden lore!
E'en as we doubt in our heart once more,
With a rush of tears to our eyelids welling,
Love comes back to his vacant dwelling.³

Composed of fourteen lines, the rondel features in the first and second lines a refrain that is repeated as lines eight and nine and lines thirteen and fourteen. The refrain must

¹ The Cambridge History of English Literature (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1917), XIII, Part II, 235.

² Johnson, p. 302.

³ Works, p. 325.

fit into the sentence; it must not break the continuity of thought. The rondel has only two rhyming sounds, usually rhyming a b b a a b a b a a b.¹

A third French form, the triolet, is illustrated by Dobson's "Circe":

In the School of Coquettes
 Madam Rose is a scholar:--
 O, they fish with all nets
 In the School of Coquettes!
 When her brooch she forgets
 'Tis to show her new collar;
 In the School of Coquettes
 Madam Rose is a scholar!²

Thus the triolet "lends itself readily to frank fun with a flavor of personality" and is best when it is used for epigrams.³ It has eight lines; the first is repeated as the fourth, and the first and second are repeated as the seventh and eighth. The lines are usually short, and the rhythm is anapestic. There are only two rhymes, a b a a a b a b, and the b rhyme is preferably double or triple.⁴

Probably the best known French form, the ballade, which was used by Villon and, after falling out of favor, was revived by Théodore de Banville,⁵ is illustrated by Dobson's "Ballad of Prose and Rhyme":

¹Johnson, p. 302.

²Works, p. 323.

³Matthews, p. 146.

⁴Johnson, p. 307.

⁵Matthews, pp. 160-161.

When the ways are heavy with mire and rut,
 In November fogs, in December snows,
 When the North Wind howls, and the doors are shut,--
 There is place and enough for the pains of prose;
 But whenever a scent from the whitethorn blows,
 And the jasmine-stars at the casement climb,
 And a Rosalind-face at the lattice shows,
 Then hey!--for the ripple of laughing rhyme!

When the brain gets dry as an empty nut,
 When the reason stands on its squarest toes,
 When the mind (like a beard) has a 'formal cut,'--
 There is place and enough for the pains of prose;
 But whenever the May-blood stirs and glows,
 And the young year draws to the 'golden prime,'
 And Sir Romeo sticks in his ear a rose,--
 Then hey!--for the ripple of laughing rhyme!

In a theme where the thoughts have a pedant-strut,
 In a changing quarrel of 'Ayes' and 'Noes,'
 In a starched procession of 'If' and 'But,'--
 There is a place and enough for the pains of prose;
 But whenever a soft glance softer grows
 And the light hours dance to the trysting-time,
 And the secret is told 'that no one knows,'--
 Then hey!--for the ripple of laughing rhyme!

Envoy.

In the work-a-day world,--or its needs and woes,
 There is place and enough for the pains of prose;
 But whenever the May-bells clash and chime,
 Then hey!--for the ripple of laughing rhyme!¹

The ballade is longer than other French forms and is widest in its range and possibilities. It is appropriate for themes "where sentiment and humor disclose themselves in turn, like twins playing hide-and-seek."² Not a folk song

¹Works, pp. 347-348.

²Matthews, pp. 160-161.

but a highly aristocratic and cultured literary art, it has three stanzas of eight lines each and a concluding stanza of four lines called the envoi. The refrain is the eighth line of each stanza and the last line of the envoi. Some ballades have only three rhymes, but the difficulty of finding so many rhymes on one terminal has led to the use of four rhymes in many ballades.¹

Another French form marked by repetitions and alternate refrains, the villanelle, has three line stanzas: the first and third lines rhyme; the middle line rhymes with the middle lines of all the stanzas. The first line of the first stanza is repeated as the last line of all the even numbered stanzas, and the last line of the first stanza is repeated as the last line of the odd numbered stanzas.² So much repetition makes the villanelle very artificial, as is shown in "Tu Ne Quaesieris":

Seek not, O Maid, to know
(Alas! unblest the trying!)
When thou and I must go.

No lore of stars can show.
What shall be, vainly prying,
Seek not, O Maid, to know.

Will Jove long years bestow?--
Or is 't with this one dying,
That thou and I must go.³

¹Johnson, p. 309.

²Ibid., p. 311.

³Works, p. 339.

In the chant royal, Dobson's one attempt, "The Dance of Death," was not so artistically successful as were his attempts at other French forms. It is an extended ballade made up of five stanzas, each of eleven lines, with an envoi of five lines. The refrain is the last line of each stanza and also of the envoi. The chant royal takes much ingenuity in rhyming because it calls for as many as fifteen rhymes on one terminal.¹

When using French forms, which are light because they are artificial, a poet is more occupied with technique than with content. Matthews says that attempts at French forms are games with strict rules. "And when the pattern of the intricate design is once attempted, the execution, playful though it may be, must concord therewith."² No originality or freedom is allowed. To stay within the prescribed bounds takes intellectual capacity and discourages emotion.

Forms of light verse originating in English are the limerick, the Clerihew, and nonsense verse. Frank J. Warnke and Alex Preminger point out that the limerick is unique in that it is the only English stanza form used exclusively for light verse. They say further that it is always comic, often nonsensical, frequently bawdy. Its

¹ Johnson, p. 312.

² P. 152.

rhythm is anapestic. Its verse form is composed of five lines rhyming a a b b a, of which the first, second, and fifth are trimeter and the third and fourth are dimeter. The final line is often a repetition or a varied repetition of the first line. The modern tendency is for the final line not to repeat the first line but to surprise or to show witty reversal.¹ "Arthur" by Nash is an example:

There was an old man of Calcutta,
Who coated his tonsils with butta,
Thus converting his snore
From a thunderous roar
To a soft, oleaginous mutta.²

In addition to the limerick, Nash wrote several limicks, which are apparently an invention of his own that leaves the reader feeling that something is missing. The limick has four lines rhyming a a b a and has anapestic rhythm:

Two nudists of Dover,
Being purple all over,
Were munched by a cow
When mistaken for clover.³

Related to the limerick is the Clerihew, a form of comic poetry invented by Edmund Clerihew Bentley, an Englishman, who lived from 1875 to 1956. A. J. M. Smith says it consists of two couplets of unequal length often with complex or somewhat ridiculous rhymes and presents a

¹"Limerick," Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics, p. 449.

²Verses from 1929 on, p. 53.

³Ibid., p. 380.

potted biography of a famous personage or historical character. The humor consists in concentrating on the trivial, the fantastic, or the ridiculous and presenting it with dead-pan solemnity as the characteristic, the significant, or the essential.¹

Nash is one of the American practitioners of the Clerihew:

Robert Browning
Avoided drowning
Unparallelly
To P. B. Shelley.²

Nonsense verse is also a form of verse suited to the writer of light verse. John M. Munro discusses nonsense verse: "Pure nonsense is entirely dependent on the rejection of what most people consider logical or even normal--an acceptance of the conventions of a completely different universe."³ The writer of nonsense does not use terms that have emotional appeal; he talks about such things as bananas and boots. He does not appeal to our sympathy or imagination. His world is fixed as are his rhyme and meter. Nonsense is not turning a clever phrase or telling a humorous anecdote; it does not have a positive effect because it is a refusal to communicate anything which could be considered positive. What it communicates is not real, but arbitrarily made up.

Nonsense writers are few. They have to have "unceasing

¹"Clerihew," Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics, p. 141.

²Versus (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1950), p. 127.

³"Nonsense," Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics, p. 572.

control and a disposition more cerebral than emotional."¹ The limick quoted from Nash is nonsense. Nudists in Dover are probably non-existent; at any rate, they would not be a normal occurrence, and if they were, they would not likely be purple all over. Furthermore, no good cow would mistake purple people for clover.

Light verse can be written in any genre. The parodist can use a sonnet for light purposes. He can mock an epic or an elegy. But the forms discussed in the preceding pages, especially the classical genres, are the forms which the writer of light verse finds most useful.

Tone

The writer of light verse must consider not only the requisites of genres but also the tone of his work. Tone is the attitude the writer has toward the subject and toward his audience.² The tone of light verse will vary from the careless ease and urbanity of vers de société to the impudence of a bawdy epigram, from the dispassionate wit of a verse on the several meanings of a word to the sympathetic humor of a verse on baby chicks. The dominant

¹Munro, pp. 572-573.

²Thrall, Hibbard, Holman, p. 487.

tone of light verse, according to Cooper, is intellectual.¹

The writer uses his mind rather than his heart, ideas rather than emotions. The tone depends to a great extent on how successful the writer is in the use of wit and humor.

Eastman defines wit as a trick played upon the mind.²

Rosenthal and Smith say that wit originally meant intellectual power:

gradually the meaning changed to something nearer intellectual alertness, with an ability to see unfamiliar connections between words and ideas in a manner often surprising and amusing. The surprise need not be stunning, the humor need not be hilarious; in fact, either or both may be almost invisible, hidden in the felicitous phrasing a writer employs.³

McCord points out that wit has to be sudden: "the devious, the labyrinthic is fatal to wit."⁴ Essenwein and Roberts, in pointing out that wit is seeing an unexpected relationship between two objects or ideas, say it is a disclosure that does not "excite any higher emotion than admiration for the cleverness of the witty person and for his mental superiority."⁵ An amusing example is in Nash's calling his teeth his "molar system."⁶

¹Pp. 511-512.

²P. 76.

³P. 432.

⁴P. xxv. ⁵P. 227.

⁶"Lines To Be Muttered Through Clenched Teeth and Quite a Lot of Lather, In the Country," Many Long Years Ago, p. 154.

Whereas wit is the comparison of two dissimilar ideas, humor is the description of "the ludicrous as it is in itself."¹ William Allen Neilson says humor is the perception of incongruity: the source of humor is incongruity between appearance and reality or between pretense and fact. He further says that critical detachment is necessary in order to be able to see the ludicrous, and critical detachment reduces the element of imagination or emotion that is necessary for serious poetry,² leaving humor for light verse. William K. Zinsser notes that today's humorist sees the unusual or the ludicrous in everyday events and points them out to us. He makes us laugh at those things that we ordinarily take for granted.³ Walker Gibson makes us laugh at the daily ritual of shaving:

When on the cheeks white waves of lather hang
Like whipped cream, mashed potatoes, or meringue,
Stoutly he grasps his weapon to begin.⁴

Nash makes us laugh at the blue-blood Virginians who are really from New York or Philadelphia. We take for granted

¹Leigh Hunt, cited by W. D. Adams, The Witty and Humorous Side of the English Poets (London: Sampson Low Marston, Searle, and Rivington, 1880), p. 4.

²Essentials of Poetry (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1912), pp. 245-249.

³P. 118. ⁴"Shave," Reckless Spenders, p. 11.

that because they have homes in Virginia and have enough wealth to ride horses,¹ they are plantation descendants.

It is incongruous for us to call them Virginians:

Oh what is more beautiful and more Southern than a Southern beauty from Philadelphia or Rumson, And indeed where was Southern beauty before the advent of Rubenstein and Elizabeth Arden?

. the Virginians from Virginia have to ride automobiles because the Virginians from Long Island are the only ones who can afford to ride horses.¹

W. D. Adams distinguishes between wit and humor.

Since humor is a portrayal of the ludicrous, it is slower than wit. It plays around, above, and beneath a subject while wit comes straight to the point. Wit favors the pun, epigram, and satire while humor favors burlesque, parody, and nonsense.² Thrall, Hibbard, and Holman further distinguish between wit and humor: wit is primarily intellectual and is expressed in the skillful use of play in language, while humor in addition to being intellectual is recognizant of "human values and deals with the foibles and incongruities of human nature, good-naturedly exhibited."³ Wit is pointed play; humor is expository play.

Closely related to the intellectual tone of light verse is a playful tone. Play was discussed by Walker

¹"First Families, Move Over," Verses from 1929 on, p. 158.

²P. 5. ³P. 510.

Gibson in his television series, Studies in Style. He defined play as tension and relaxation like the "play" in a rope. We use words that have more than one meaning so that our language will have elasticity and sufficient ambiguity. We are modest about our knowledge, knowing that it will be obsolete tomorrow. We do not want to make positive statements today that will not be relevant tomorrow; so we leave room in our language for play, for change, for more than one meaning. Gibson further defined play as pretending. The use of play in language creates an illusion: we do not mean what we say; what we say is really an illusion. We know that play is "fun and games," kidding. We have fun with words, trying them out in different situations, adding suffixes and prefixes for comical effect, making funny language analogies. Play is also taking a risk, gambling. We are not sure that what we say today will make sense tomorrow, but we go ahead and say it. Gibson believes that play in language represents a lack of certainty that is typical of our age. Lax grammar and words with double meaning reflect some of the chaos of our time, are a truer representation of life than perfect grammar and positive words.¹

¹October 24, 26, 28, 1966.

To distinguish between intellectual qualities and play, between wit and humor is difficult. All are joined in forming the tone of light verse.

Language

The playful and intellectual tone of light verse influences the writer in the third aspect of style that he must consider: the use of language. Auden believes that the language of the poet of light verse is close to ordinary speech.¹ The language the poet speaks and hears spoken in his everyday life is the usual level of language in his verse. He is conversational. Dobson begins a poem with "He lived in that past Georgian day."² Nash starts with "I am now about to make a remark that I suppose most parents will think me hateful for."³ Gibson is conversational with "A man I know named J. Augustus Jones."⁴

Exceptions to this usage that I have noted in the three poets under discussion are the frequent use of French words and phrases and the occasional use of dialect. The

¹P. viii.

²"A Gentleman of the Old School," Works, p. 7.

³"Our Child Doesn't Know Anything or Thank God," Verses from 1929 on, p. 29.

⁴"Personalized," Reckless Spenders, p. 58.

use of foreign words and phrases raises the level of language from standard to formal. Dobson's frequent use of such terms is probably due to his classical training and his many translations as well as his French education and ancestry. Perhaps the reason Gibson and Nash use French terms is that anything French has connotations of lightness and gaiety. These lines from Dobson's "Cupid's Alley" contain French phrases:

My Lord may walk a pas de Cour
To Jenny's pas de Chalet;--¹

"Taste Buds, En Garde!" by Nash has an "interlingual" pun in it:

Although I'll eat the strawberry when frozen
It's not the very berry I'd have chosen.
The naughty admens claim with gall divine
That it is better than the genu-ine.
New language they devise to sing its praise,
But only le bon Dieu can coin a fraise.²

Gibson uses several French terms in "The Man That Bought the Bank at Monte Carlo."³ The French terms are appropriate for two reasons: they connote lightness and they "fit" the subject matter of the poem since the action of the poem takes place in southern France.

¹Works, p. 95.

²Harper's, CCXXXIV (January 1967), 95.

³Come As You Are, p. 34.

The use of foreign terms makes language more formal; the use of dialect makes language informal. Dialect is the speaking habit of people who for geographical or educational reasons have not moved to the same stage in language development as the majority of people speaking that language. We have a tendency to be amused by that which is different, and we are amused by dialects or by language variations that we are not accustomed to. The Irish brogue, the English cockney, the Brooklyn accent, the Southern drawl are all good for smiles when used in verse. They give a light touch. Nash utilizes the Brooklyn accent in "Thanks, Possibly, to Whatever Powers May Be": "What's with youse?"¹ Gibson uses a cowboy drawl in "Movies": "two-gun-totin," "singin," "leavin," and "lovin."²

In addition to levels of language, there are levels of words that make up language. The writer of light verse can use words from any level or from any band of the language spectrum. Austin Dobson uses formal words representative of the formal society and the polite conversation reflected in his verse, words such as alembicate, soporific, and procreant. But it was against his principles to use many long words. In his statement of principles governing light

¹New Yorker, XXXIX (March 23, 1963), 40.

²Reckless Spenders, p. 26.

verse, he said one should be sparing of long words.¹

Ogden Nash often uses formal words such as pallid, paten, dolor, replevin, and tort. But the majority of the words of all three poets come from the standard, conversational language level of their eras.

All turn to the colloquial level from time to time. A colloquialism is an expression permissible in informal conversation but not in formal speech or writing.² When it appears in writing, it destroys serious intent; it gives a light effect. Dobson's use of the expression "hoist his own petard"³ is a colloquialism. He felt it was permissible to be colloquial but not commonplace.⁴ Nash says colloquially of a cough that "it never quite comes off."⁵ Gibson colloquializes about a burro that once "waited till he like to died."⁶ Gibson in his television series stated that the use of the colloquial in writing is a rising

¹Cited by Lawrence John Zillman, Writing Your Poem: A Practical Approach to Verse Writing (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1950), p. 120.

²Thrall, Hibbard, Holman, p. 94.

³Works, p. 472. ⁴Cited by Zillman, p. 120.

⁵"Can I Get You a Glass of Water?" Verses, p. 476.

⁶"Before Starting," Come As You Are, p. 9.

trend.¹ The use of colloquial expression is less and less an indication of light verse.

Another band of the language spectrum in evidence in the verse of these three versifiers is the slang band which is closely related to the colloquial. Thrall, Hibbard, and Holman point out that the aptness of slang is usually based on its humor, its exaggeration, . . . or a combination of these qualities.² Slang, too, is inappropriate to writing; and when it is written, it gives lightness to the writing. Gibson calls the king of Bavaria "loco."³ Nash exclaims "gee whiz" about aspic.⁴ Dobson disapproves of slang and says so in his principles.⁵

Nash reaches to the lowest band of the language spectrum and continually uses solecisms--errors in grammar and idiom⁶--and barbarisms--words coined from analogies falsely made with other words in good standing.⁷ We see a solecism in "Ah youth, youth! What euphorian days them was!"⁸ Gibson uses a rare solecism: "The biggest chocolate

¹October 26, 1966. ²P. 462.

³"Linderhof: A Tale of Old Bavaria," Come, p. 43.

⁴"Aspic," Everyone But Thee and Me, p. 124.

⁵Cited by Zillman, p. 120.

⁶Thrall, Hibbard, Holman, p. 464.

⁷Ibid., p. 44.

⁸"No Doctors Today, Thank You," Family Reunion, p. 132.

frappes you ever seen."¹ Nash may have reasoned thus to arrive at a false analogy: if an employee is one who is employed by an employer, then a "gossipee" is one who is gossiped about by a "gossiper."

There are two kinds of people who blow through life
like a breeze,
And one kind is gossipers, and the other is gossipees,
And they certainly annoy each other,
But they certainly enjoy each other,
Yes, they pretend to flout each other,
But they couldn't do without each other,
• • • • •
And if you want to get the most out of life why the
thing to do is be a gossiper by day and a
gossipee by night.²

One of Nash's more famous barbarisms is his answer to the question about when Chicago was founded. ". . . I didn't even know it was losted."³ Clyde S. Kilby tells us that lax use of grammar creates a lazy mood appropriate to light verse.⁴ The use of less than standard diction keeps verse from being serious and adds lightness to it.

All poets know words and use them lovingly. Sometimes a whole poem is based upon one word in order to ingeniously show how many ways that one word can be used. Norman

¹"A Lesson in History," Come As You Are, p. 40.

²"I Have It on Good Authority," Verses, p. 156.

³"Ask Daddy, He Won't Know," Verses, p. 340.

⁴Poetry and Life (New York: The Odyssey Press, 1953), p. 153.

Nathan tells us that poets like to take advantage of areas and shades of meaning. He gives the example, "I am older than my father."¹ To be able to use the word "older" in this manner is to be aware of all the possibilities of the word. To be able to use words in such relationships is a form of wit and a form of play. Further, the poet knows which words have light connotations. Dobson in a verse "To Monsieur de la Mothe le Vayer, Upon the Death of His Son" consoles the Monsieur with

Let thy tears flow, Le Vayer, let them flow:
None of scant cause thy sorrowing can accuse,
Since, losing that which thou for aye does lose,
E'en the most wise might find a ground for woe.²

Words such as flow, scant, and might connote something other than death or deep sorrow. The consolation, though sincere, is pleasant rather than deeply sympathetic: it is light. Dobson in one of his rondeaus, "To Brander Matthews," takes advantage of the meanings of "vain" and "vein."

In vain today I scrape and blot:
The nimble words, the phrases neat,
Decline to mingle or to meet;
My skill is all foregone--forgot.
• • • • • • •
Alas! 'Tis all too clear I'm not
In vein today!³

¹Judging Poetry (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1961), p. 189.

²Works, p. 395. ³Ibid., p. 386.

Nash in "Golly, How Truth Will Out!" uses various synonyms for the word lie: whopper, fib, glib, subterfuge, prevarication.¹ In "Tableau at Twilight" he calls a child with an ice cream cone a coniferous child.² All three poets like to display their ingenuity with words.

The knowledge and command of words is vital to wit and play. Kilby points out the way in which the writer of light verse differs from the serious poet in the choice of words. Light verse takes "advantage of accidental and whimsical aspects of relationships whereas poetry seeks the more permanent analogies existing between things."³ To call a dump a "happy hunting ground" or to call a set of teeth a "molar system" is fun, but these are not lasting analogies. As Kilby further points out, these analogies come from the mind rather than the heart. Light verse "is generally pleasing in proportion to the whimsicality and mere cleverness manifested. For this reason, light verse makes much of play on words."⁴

A favorite form of play with words is the pun. Eastman describes the pun as a process similar to starting somewhere and never arriving, but getting somewhere else and being satisfied with the second destination as if it

¹Verses from 1929 on, p. 55.

²Ibid., p. 372.

³P. 126. ⁴P. 153.

had been the intended one all along. The second destination is "just as interesting and just as plausible, but just as opposite as can be and therefore ludicrous."¹ Untermeyer adds that a pun serves a double purpose: it plays with a word as a word and as a sound.² Oliver Wendell Holmes puns the pun:

Life and language are alike sacred. Homicide and verbicide--that is, violent treatment of a word with fatal results to the legitimate meaning, which is its life--are alike forbidden. Manslaughter, which is the meaning of the one, is the same as man's laughter, which is the end of the other.³

Austin Dobson does not use many puns: he suggested that writers of light verse should avoid them.⁴ Ogden Nash loves to pun: he tells of the man who hated spring and was glad to be shot with an autumnatic.⁵ He describes the woman who in looking for a suitable religion "Found peace in the sweet Bahai and Bahai."⁶ Walker Gibson puns from time to time. In "Come As You Are" he talks about the way people dress: ". . . people suit themselves."⁷

¹P. 124. ²Play, p. 29.

³The Autocrat of the Breakfast Table (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1892), p. 11.

⁴Cited by Zillman, p. 120.

⁵"The Individualist," Many Long Years Ago, p. 90.

⁶"The Seven Spiritual Ages of Mrs. Marmaduke Moore," Happy Days, p. 140.

⁷Come As You Are, p. 27.

Another form of play with words is word invention. Out-and-out invented words are usually a part of nonsense verse. But words invented through language analogy or for the purpose of rhyme are part of Nash's bag of poetic tools.

Spand and Spitz are intensely scrupulous,
You can't wear their suit if the seat is droopulous.¹

Another form of play in language is the use of figures of speech. Gibson in his television series discussed the metaphor. The metaphor is a process by which one calls something by a name it is not; metaphors are not based on natural relationships, but are forced on objects by the mind of the metaphor-writer.² The difference between the metaphor or simile of poetry and the metaphor or simile of light verse is the difference between the amount of emotion called forth by each. As the quotation from Kilby on page 93 of this thesis points out, the clever comparison is more appropriate to light verse. Serious poetry demands more than cleverness; it demands deep satisfaction or heart-felt truth. A clever comparison made by Dobson is his calling a light verse a metrical soufflé.³ Nash calls prickly

¹"Consider the Lapel, Sir," Verses, p. 401.

²November 28, 1966.

³"Incognita," p. 271.

heat a "fiery-footed centipede."¹ Gibson calls a cubicle
in a rest room a monk's cell.²

The clever metaphor extended or elaborated upon is the conceit. Rosenthal and Smith give the principle of the conceit: the greater the gap between the two things being compared in a simile or metaphor--"the greater, that is, the imaginative leap the poet's mind achieves--the greater the satisfaction and the sharper the conviction."³ They tell us that the conceit is intellectually daring, concise, apt, disconcertingly sudden.⁴ According to Frank J. Warnke and Alex Preminger "the faculty of wit, the capacity for finding likenesses between the apparently unlike, is central to the conceit."⁵ They list two kinds of conceits: the Petrarchan, in which physical qualities or experiences are compared with very different physical objects, and the Metaphysical, in which "spiritual qualities or functions of the described entity are presented by means of a vehicle which shares no physical features with the entity."⁶

¹"Man Bites Dog-Days," Verses from 1929 on, p. 233.

²"Gent," Reckless Spenders, p. 44.

³P. 50. ⁴P. 433.

⁵"Conceit," Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics, p. 148.

⁶Ibid.

An example of a Petrarchan conceit may be seen in Gibson's "Movies." A movie house is compared to a womb:

It must be: we feel cozy in that spot.
 The body curls and bends and fits right in;
 The knees are tucked up underneath the chin;
 There's warmth and darkness, just sufficient room--
 It is, you see, a little like the womb,
 Where bags of popcorn effortlessly flow
 Umbilically to the embryo.¹

A physical experience, the security of the womb, is compared to a physical object, the movie house.

Irony is another figure of speech used for play.

Irony is saying one thing and meaning another. The word comes from the Greek word eiron, defined by Eastman as a poker-faced, canny, and restrained person who always had something more in mind than he was telling.² Thrall, Hibbard, and Holman show how irony is a device or figure of speech appropriate to light verse: it is not harsh in its wording; it is marked by an "unemotional detachment" on the part of the writer; it gives the impression of great restraint.³ Lack of emotion and restraint are characteristics that make irony appropriate to light verse. Forms of light irony are hyperbole, or bold exaggeration, and understatement. Nash's calling a football game between Dillard and

¹ Reckless Spenders, pp. 26-27.

² P. 192.

³ P. 248.

Talladega a "Homeric deadlock"¹ is ironic exaggeration.

Dobson's saying of a young man trying to explain to a young lady the reason that he cannot marry her, "Of course it mattered not to him a feather,"² is ironic understatement.

Paradox is used for play and light effect. Paradox is a "seemingly contradictory or absurd statement which may actually be well-founded or true."³ The last line of the following epilogue by Dobson is a paradox.

Let the dream pass, the fancy fade!
We clutch a shape, and hold a shade.
Is Peace so peaceful?--Nay,--who knows?
There are volcanoes under snows.⁴

In "Oh, Please Don't Get Up!" Nash points out the paradox in calling women the weaker sex:

. . . women walk around all day wearing
shoes that a man would break his
neck the first step he took in
them because where a man's shoe has
a heel a woman's shoe has a stilt.

Which is why I think that when it comes to
physical prowess,
Why woman is a wow, or should I say a wowess.⁵

¹"One Man's Meed Is Another Man's Overemphasis,"
Verses from 1929 on, p. 211.

²"A Story from a Dictionary," Works, p. 254.

³Thrall, Hibbard, Holman, p. 339.

⁴"Prologue to Abbey's 'Quiet Life,'" Works, p. 314.

⁵Verses from 1929 on, pp. 247-248.

Another figure of speech that may be used to give play to language is antithesis, or balancing contrasting words, phrases, clauses, ideas, or sentences against each other.¹ Stephen F. Fogle and Huntington Brown tell us that antithesis is an ideal source for display of satirical wit and in contemporary writing is chiefly used in humorous verse.² Putting two opposing structures or ideas together requires use of the intellect; consequently antithesis is appropriate to light verse. Dobson uses antithesis in "A Madrigal" when he calls Queen Victoria "royal, and yet lowly, lowly, and yet great."³ Another form of antithesis is the oxymoron, the bringing together of two contradictory terms.⁴ Nash gets in an oxymoron with a reference to a "friendly neighborhood shark."⁵ In the statement "I benignly retort"⁶ made by one of Dobson's characters, we see another example of the oxymoron.

¹ Thrall, Hibbard, Holman, p. 28.

² "Antithesis," Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics, p. 40.

³ Works, p. 356.

⁴ Thrall, Hibbard, Holman, p. 335.

⁵ "Bankers Are Just Like Anybody Else, Except Richer," Verses from 1929 on, p. 161.

⁶ "Premiers Amours," Works, p. 287.

In the use of language syntax should be considered as well as level, choice of words, and figures of speech. Sentence structure is governed to a certain extent by the use of the conversational, standard level of language. The sentence structure of light verse corresponds for the most part to normal syntactical patterns. But light effect can be achieved by inverted patterns. Ogden Nash causes the reader to pause with

Any more than the leopard will change his spots
Or its natural stripes the zebra'll.¹

Dobson advised avoiding inversions.² He used ellipsis and repetition which are characteristic of oral discourse in the line "He thinks she thinks he thinks she sleeps."³

Closely related to inverted word order is the use of the twisted cliché. Instead of saying "They beat the stuffing out of him," Nash says "Out of him they beat the stuffing."⁴ He uses other twisted clichés: "Horse of another off-color" describes the smutty joke teller.⁵

¹"Don't Bite the Hand That Puts Its Foot In Your Mouth," Everyone But Thee and Me, p. 75.

²Cited by Zillman, p. 120.

³"The Story of Rosina," Works, p. 25.

⁴"Jack Do-Good-for-Nothing," Everyone, p. 25.

⁵"King Lear," Happy Days, p. 27.

"There's no police like Holmes" describes Nash's reaction to Sherlock Holmes.¹

Another syntactical device that gives light effect is the use of impromptu or interrupting remarks placed in parentheses. In the midst of "A Lesson in History" Gibson pauses to comment:

For instance, how about the deed for Crete?
(I always like a fine full five-stress line.)
They've got a ruin there that can't be beat.²

Dobson inserted an aside about Pepys' efforts through his diary to "cleanse his bosom":

. . . (and indeed
It sometimes wanted cleaning).³

Many times in light verse, we come across familiar phrases or sentences. To insert famous passages in their verses, with comical effect, is a favorite device of writers of light verse. Nash's "and lawyers make bachelors of us all" has a familiar ring.⁴ So does Gibson's "God

¹ "Macbeth Has Murdered Sleep?" Happy Days, p. 51.

² Come As You Are, p. 39.

³ "Pepys' Diary," Works, p. 408.

⁴ "Advice Outside a Church," Many Long Years Ago, p. 49.

knows He moves in mysterious ways."¹ Gibson echoes John Donne with

When I hear Santa ring out merrily,
I know for whom he tolls--he tolls for me.²

Metrics and Versification

The writer of light verse must consider genre, tone, and language; he must also consider verse technique--the meters and rhyme schemes appropriate to light verse. The metrics and rhymes should be perfect. Dobson in his statement of principles for light verse advises that one should choose the lightest and brightest measures; one should let the rhymes be frequent but not forced; the rhymes should be rigorously exact to the ear.³

Measures or metrics or rhythmic patterns appropriate to light verse are short lines and regularly accented lines. A. S. Burack suggests that anapestic rhythm (two unaccented syllables followed by an accented one) is a gay rhythm.⁴ We see anapestic rhythm in the limerick. Short lines such as the monometer, dimeter, and trimeter suggest airiness and lightness. Variation of line lengths also suggests playfulness and gaiety. In the following stanza from one

¹"A Vision of Heaven from Ohio State," Come, p. 14.

²"An Epistle for Christmas," Come, p. 56.

³Cited by Zillman, p. 120. ⁴P. 387.

of Dobson's poems, we see a variation of line lengths from tetrameter to trimeter and a perfect iambic rhythm, so perfect that it is almost sing-song:

I watch you through the garden walks,
 I watch you float between
 The avenues of dahlia stalks,
 And flicker on the green.¹

Dobson has poems with one-foot lines and poems with lines of six feet. In poems where the line lengths are varied, the variations occur at regular intervals as in the example above. Nash, too, has written poems with varied line lengths occurring at regular intervals. But much of the time he places no such restraints on himself. Sometimes, as Eastman points out, "the metrical beat is delayed in order to get all the necessary words in"; other times, "the metrical beat is speeded up unconscionably because there were not enough words to put in."² The following lines illustrate:

This is a song to celebrate banks,
 Because they are full of money and you go into
 them and all you hear is clinks and clangs.³

¹"To an Intrusive Butterfly," Works, p. 148.

²P. 143.

³"Bankers Are Just Like Anybody Else, Except Richer," Verses from 1929 on, p. 160.

Nash often and sometimes amusingly defies all the maxims about perfection in the form of light verse.

Meters are not the sole determinant of light verse, of course, and much light verse is written in the form of the iambic pentameter rhymed couplet which is also used for serious verse. The language and tone determine the lightness in this sort of verse. Walker Gibson writes much verse in iambic pentameter.

A recent innovation in meter is the use of the double dactyl line for nonsense verse. Its inventors are Anthony Hecht and John Hollander. The form is as follows:

Higgledy-piggledy,
Benjamin Harrison,
Twenty-third President,
Was, and, as such,

Served between Clevelands, and
Save for this trivial
Idiosyncracy,
Didn't do much.¹

It will be interesting to see if Nash tries out this verse form. He has tried many variations of metrics and genres.

Burack has these words of advice about rhymes in light verse: rhymes should be exact, not approximate; there should be no rhymes of words whose pronunciations are identical, such as ball and bawl. Any departure from exact rhyming distracts, and light verse is too short for

¹"Higgledy Piggledy," Time, March 3, 1967, p. 108.

distractions. Polysyllabic rhymes are good when used in moderation.¹ Thrall, Hibbard, and Holman define feminine rhyme as rhyme of two consecutive syllables, useful "for lightness and delicacy of movement."² We see feminine rhyme in these two lines of Dobson's:

I scarcely think he knew what he was doing,
But that last line had quite a touch of wooing.³

Triple rhyme or the rhyming of three consecutive syllables is frequently "reserved for humorous, satirical verse."⁴

Nash furnishes an example:

Tots and sots, so different and yet so identical!
What a humiliating coincidence for pride parental!⁵

In rhyme as in meter, Nash is noted for shattering the rules.

Many times he mutilates words to make them rhyme, and he is also not hesitant about using identical rhymes. Gibson has written one poem with off-key rhymes. "Blues for an Old Blue" is a poem about an old grad who feels out-of-place at his class reunion. The off-key rhymes reflect his off-key feeling: some of the rhymes are beer and four, hat

¹P. 388. ²P. 419.

³"A Story from a Dictionary," Works, p. 255.

⁴Thrall, Hibbard, Holman, p. 419.

⁵"It Must Be the Milk," Verses, p. 41.

and fate, heaven and Haven.¹ Dobson rhymed monosyllable words with polysyllable words with light effect; for example, Romances with glance is.² Most critics believe that rhyme and meter in light verse should be perfect, but at the same time they point out the comical and light effects achieved through deliberate imperfections.

The three writers under discussion have brought their own individualities to light verse. The style of Austin Dobson is polite and exact. That of Ogden Nash is mischievous. Walker Gibson's is witty. Elements in the individual style of one can be seen in the styles of the others. Elements of each of the four aspects of style just considered--genre, tone, language, and metrics--can be seen in the remaining aspects, overlapping and mingling to become style.

¹ Reckless Spenders, p. 46.

² "A Story from a Dictionary," Works, p. 254.

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