

POETIC JUSTICE

by Edwin D. Reilly, Jr.
for the Sunday Gazette

And slowly answered Arthur from the barge:
"The old order changeth, yielding place to new,
And God fulfils himself in many ways,
Lest one good custom should corrupt the world."

"The Passing of Arthur" – Alfred, Lord Tennyson

The opening quote is, of course, the opening of the last of the 12 poems that comprise Lord Tennyson's masterpiece, "Idylls of the King." There is plenty of reason but no rhyme in those four lines, though there is a pleasing beat to such "blank verse." But I far prefer poems that rhyme. Consider the sheer magic of the opening lines of Edgar Allan Poe's "The Raven":

Once upon a midnight dreary, while I pondered weak and weary,
Over many a quaint and curious volume of forgotten lore,
While I nodded, nearly napping, suddenly there came a tapping,
As of some one gently rapping, rapping at my chamber door.
'Tis some visitor,' I muttered, 'tapping at my chamber door -
Only this, and nothing more.'

The onset of my poetic reminiscence is a recent discovery of a book by a favorite author, Nicholson Baker, that had heretofore escaped my notice—his 2009 novel *The Anthologist*. I had read and reviewed at the Library an earlier non-fiction work by Baker, "Double Fold," that decried the fact that many libraries were discarding original copies of old newspapers. He urged, with no great heed known to me yet, that they be rescued and preserved. I had also read and enjoyed several of his other works, except for the naughty ones, "The Fermata," and "Vox"—Monica Lewinsky's gift to President Clinton.

"The Anthologist," beyond its enjoyable story about the failed fictional poet Paul Chowder, is a virtual textbook on the structure of poetry itself. Chowder, the protagonist, has much to say about the relative merit of rhyme vs. blank verse, even though he vacillates as the book unfolds. He says that the attack on rhyme began in 1602 with Thomas Campion (1567-1620), who considered it uncouth. Chowder considers that opinion very strange because Campion "was one of the great lute-song writers of the day," and most song lyrics rely heavily on rhyme. I so much believe that song lyrics can be read aloud rather than sung that I did exactly that at one of the wonderful poetry galas that, in many recent years, Linda Witkowski has arranged and held in the McChesney Room.

Here is the beginning and a couple of later stanzas of another of my favorite poems that rhymes:

It is an ancient Mariner,
And he stoppeth one of three.
'By thy long grey beard and glittering eye,
Now wherefore stopp'st thou me?

.
. .
Day after day, day after day,
We stuck, nor breath nor motion;
As idle as a painted ship
Upon a painted ocean.

Water, water, everywhere,
And all the boards did shrink;
Water, water, everywhere,
Nor any drop to drink.

The Rime of the Ancient Mariner –Samuel Taylor Coleridge

By happenstance, “rhyme” and “rime” are homonyms, with the latter having the precisely appropriate meaning “frost formed on cold objects by the rapid freezing of water vapor.” The rime-encrusted mariner of the poem came close to becoming a frozen stiff on a ship... “as idle as a painted ship upon a painted ocean.”

This poem was the basis for the greatest nickname ever granted to a major league ballplayer. From 1958 to 1966, the Pittsburgh Pirates employed a home-run hitting but quite immobile first baseman, Dick Stuart, who led the league in errors by a first basement for every one of those years. Inspirationally, his manager, Danny Mertaugh, dubbed him “The Ancient Mariner” because “he stoppeth one of three.”

As much as I love “Mariner,” it does invoke a haunting memory, the day my 13-year-old self was called upon to recite a portion of this long poem that included the last stanza that I quoted above. Intoning that first occurrence of “water, water everywhere” went down smoothly, but the best I could do with the next line was “And all the flesh did creep.” I was mortified, disgraced by a Perry moment five years before that poor fellow was even born. Surely that’s why I was never elected President.

Chowder, that is Baker, is an extraordinarily knowledgeable wordsmith. For example, he says that when Robert Herrick allegedly wrote “Gather ye rosebuds while ye may,” the first “ye” was a typo. The intent was “yr” as an abbreviation for “your” and was corrected in a second edition. And he says that when poet Quintus Horatius Flaccus (65– 27 BCE), known to us as “Horace,” wrote “carpe diem,” his intended meaning was not the mistranslation “seize the day,” because the Latin for “seize” is “cape,” not “carpe,” which means “pluck.” Thus Horace, saying “carpe diem,” is telling us to pluck the day, not just seize it and hold it ransom, but to grab it, enjoy it, and squeeze the juice out of it. But then Chowder says that the poems in question would not be remembered today but for the typo and the mistranslation.

Did you know that Schenectady County is one of the very few counties in New York State that has a poet laureate? In 2008, upon the strong advocacy of poet Bill Poppino of Niskayuna, the County Legislature created the position, sought applications a year later, and from the responses chose and appointed local published poet Steve Hellyard Swartz to the position. Visit the website

<http://hudsonvalleywritersguild.wordpress.com/tag/steve-hellyard-swartz/>

to see Steve reading at last year’s Community of Writers presentation. And if you are reading this early enough, there is time to attend this year’s presentation at 2 p.m. today in the McChesney Room of the main Library when Steve will be one of nine writers who read from their work.

I last wrote a poem, a very bad one, in about the fourth grade, and hadn’t attempted another until now. “The Anthologist” got me started on word meanings, so the intent of my new poem is to ridicule the current runaway abuse of the meanings of “icon” and “iconic.” An icon is an image of some kind that suggests a concept, a logo perhaps, such as the lighted GE emblem on the top of Building 37 downtown. The GE logo was trademarked on September 18, 1900.

We are all used to the correct use of “icon” as exemplified on our computer desktops. A small image of an hourglass, for example, represents that time is elapsing as some task is running. But no person can be an icon, though his or her photo, portrait, or statue could be so construed. But there is (or was) no iconic baseball player, Babe Ruth, or Ted Williams, or Jackie Robinson, or anyone else. “Iconic” is now being used as if it were a synonym for “unique,” which would also be a misnomer. I concede that “quintessential” is too long for headlines, but it comes closer to what I believe to be the intent, namely, that so and so epitomizes those engaged in a certain field, but is not the only one who does so. So here goes, my poem about a talking robot that I have been planning to build since I was five or so but never seem to find time for:

Wouldn’t it be ironic,
If he were called iconic?
Or would it be more comic,
If he became bionic.
And drank some gin and tonic?

I hereby submit my application to be the next county poet laureate.

Edwin D. Reilly, Jr., newly hatched poet, lives in Niskayuna and is a regular contributor to the *Sunday Gazette* Opinion page.

Postscript of 1/23/2013: Without warning, this article failed to appear on 11/20/2011. When I asked why, I was told that it was an "I love poetry" piece devoid of opinion and a local connection. But those who read this can see that there are local people named, and that the (implied) opinions expressed are that it is a nice thing that Schenectady County is one of the few NYS counties that has a poet laureate, and that *The Anthologist* is a good and interesting book.