Through the Iran-Contra Hearings with Gun and Doggerel

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Through what seems in retrospect an endless summer, the American political and religious landscape has been a free-fire zone for anyone armed with small caliber ammo and a taste for fair game. If the scrupulous fusilier is observed withholding his fire, it may be because he is momentarily overwhelmed by the resurgence of his quarry, the dextrally-pinioned zealot. This mixed brood, once as common as the passenger pigeon, has seldom been seen in the land since the demise of the government agency charged with its perpetuation, the House Unamerican Activities Committee, about which President Ronald Reagan recently said: "Remember, there was once a Congress in which they had a committee that would investigate even one of their own members if it was believed that that person had communist involvement or communist leanings. Well, they've done away with those committees. That shows the success of what the Soviets were able to do in this country with making it unfashionable to be anti-communist" (Grand Rapids Press, 2 Oct. 1987: D2). Those new to the species may wish to consult a dated but surprisingly useful fieldguide from the era in question, The Jack Acid Black Book, by Pogo as told to Walt Kelly (Simon & Schuster, 1962).

Most prominent among the volunteer targets, a throng which includes Oral Roberts, the PTL cabal, and Pat Robertson, are, of course, the Iranamokers. In an age not intimidated by the journalistic pieties of balanced reporting and the fairness doctrine, a gallery such as this would long since have been subjected to broadsides of satire and caricature. Witness the double-barreled salvos produced by London printer William Hone and cartoonist George Cruikshank in the 1820's, one of which, "The Political House that Jack Built," went through at least forty-three editions at a bob the copy:

This is THE MAN—all shaven and shorn,
All cover'd with Orders—and all forlorn . . .
Who took to his counsels, in evil hour,
The friends to the Reasons of lawless Power.
Perhaps sensing the lack of a satiric medium such as Hone found ready to hand, David Denby attempts to account for Oliver North's manipulation of the hearings in terms reminiscent of Matthew Arnold:

So Oliver North is “sincere”... It's a measure of how thoroughly values in this country have been subsumed to media considerations that “sincerity” — i.e., how well someone plays himself—becomes an issue in the Iran-contra hearings. In this country, we no longer have a culture and a set of standards that we can draw on in times of trouble—a way, short of the law, of judging anything. There’s no center, no core, just endless media images that are believed or not believed, and anyone who tries to see something for what it is risks sounding priggish, dull, and out of it. In the Reagan period, all of this has been noticed often enough, but North's performance may have marked the first time that appearances ever hustled the Constitution off the stage.

(The New Republic, 3 Aug. 1987)

Of course, no verse form or poetic tradition can by itself preserve the “culture and set of standards” Denby is seeking. But whether such standards can exist apart from a flourishing tradition of formal expression, indeed, of literary forms, is doubtful. In the West, poets have played a pre-eminent role in this regard, from the early Greek satirists and Aristophanes, through Romans Horace and Juvenal, to Jonson, Dryden, and Pope. The last-named gives a high position indeed to verse satire:

O sacred Weapon! left for Truth's defiance,
Sole dread of Folly, Vice, and Insolence!
To all but Heav'n-directed hands deny'd,
The Muse may give thee, but the Gods must guide.

Is there a contemporary verse form capable of carrying on the satiric tradition, of providing a way, “short of the law,” of judging anything? Gershon Legman, compiler and historian of the limerick, traces its ancestry to the fourteenth century, and declares it “not only the only fixed poetic form original to the English language [but] the only kind of newly-composed poetry...which has the slightest chance of survival.” Provided, that is, it remains true to its essential impurity of content and tone: “The limerick is, and was originally, an indecent verse form. The 'clean' sort of limerick is an ob-

vious palliation, a form defiled with incrimination and prurience.”

“It would be hubristic to create an openly verbal art to cope with what has come to pass” (The Limerick, 1948).

Whatever else one may say about the limerick, its bawdy content is as unassailable as any other. “The limerick is, and was originally, an indecent verse form. The 'clean' sort of limerick is an ob-

The satiric artworks should be as real as our conventions and as when, for instance, Alan Coren's

A newspaper wascarried by a man on the street;
To his annoyance, some small snags were in it.

Be it said, there were

The sequence of events in perpetuant the satiric art has been an unassailable work...
vionsal palliation, its content insipid, its rhyming artificially ingenious, its whole per-

vaded with a frustrated nonsense...” After railing with a rancor born of self-

incrimination against the academic limerick, Legman concedes its place in the canon:

“It would be manifestly unfair to deny to any class, even the educated class, the right
to create and circulate whatever folklore and folksong it is capable of, however weak-
ly verbal and uselessly formal the more virile classes might find this folklore to be”
(The Limerick, 1964).

Whatever its place in the volkstümliche Dichtung, the pedantic limerick may yet make
a contribution to the cause of social satire, taking up where the pentameter couplet
left off more than a century ago. Legman’s contention that the form itself dictates
its bawdy content may be overstated, but no one nourished on the limerick tradition
(which, as Legman observes, does not include Edward Lear’s sanitized attempts) can
deny that irreverence and indecency flow when the anapestic fit strikes. And it is
for just such treatment that the pious follies of the present age cry out:

Trust your oversexed televised fundy,
After Puffing The Lord all day Sunday,
To go down on his knees
(Thun first refuge of sleeze)
For Procuring The Lucre on Monday.

The satiric adrenaline is with difficulty turned off, even if the purpose is encomiastic,
as when, for once in this summer of our discontent, someone made a good end:

A woebegone pitchman named Keillor,
Too shy for an oral appealer,
With less art than rough magic
And a line comi-tragic,
Became the heart’s wireless healer.

The sequence which follows, in the aggregate if not in each stanza, is an experi-
ment in perpetuating the main line of the limerick tradition while addressing the con-
temporary malaise. I have (pace Legman’s scorn of annotation) appended a few
unavoidable, but I trust not wholly objectionable, footnotes. “Out, swords, and to
work withal!”
There are some who sail under false colors claiming they alone represent patriotism, mother, country, flag, church... well, they all are undoubtedly subversive... out to destroy we who truly believe...

As is generally known, we are on God's side and all who oppose us are against God! Now let me make it quite clear, when you pick on God, you pick on me! It's the same thing as picking on the flag. Almost... God is like Tizard to me. Kind of like a brother, sort of... you know... practically one of the family.

Lot of them dopes in high places maybe aren't disposed, but like I say, they're dopes and must swallow all that hoo-hah about brotherly love and forgiveness. The God in my Bible is a God of wrath and that's whose side I'm on!

Ever since they been buttonin' up the lip of them 'n the know what can tell our boys who exactly is the enemy, it's been up to us private citizens an' patriots to forestall the no-good that's such a clear and present danger to us all.

from The Jack Acid Society Black Book
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Ollie's Song
or
The Unconstitutional House that North Built

1

No brigade to its doom ere charged forth
More gung-ho than this LtCol North;
And all the world wonder'd
For some one had blunder'd:
Ollie "Ours-not-to-reason-why" North.

2

Not at blowing up Boland he balks
As the evil red empire he stalks;
With the plot in a heap,
He's low man to the keep:
There's your mano a guano, Guy Fawkes.

3

A lim'rist's wet dream is ol' Ollie;
But yielding to cheap rhymes is folly.
One might, for a start,
Look into one's heart . . .
And write out of lust for Oll's dolly.

4

An Antigone tall was Fawn Hall
Who would downsize her briefs wond'rous small;
Till instead of the shredder,
She filed some in her sweater,
Growing buxom at high duty's call.
A scoundrel, the gun-runner Secord
Secured a last refuge in Gifford.
O my patriot state!
Erupt evergreen hate!
Spew ash on the grave of your landlord!

Sir John Poindexter, USN (Ret.),
Now departs with his head held high yet,
As it poked while he spoke
Through amnesiac smoke:
Under oath his tobacco gets wet.

A codger covert was Bill Casey,
Who spread C. I. Aides like the quinsy;
As to who loved whose ass,
We'll let that question pass—
(If I were O. North, I'd be queasy.)

According to Ollie the R----r,
The last to smell rat was the G----r;
But the less that he “knows,”
The longer it grows:
That band-aid's in lieu of a z----r.

Moreover, most effusive, not ver
a Mr. Walt Tribune: “A
culminating nothing in
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NOTES

"The Unconstitutional House . . .": My subtitle plays off that of an anonymous sequel to William Hone’s “Political House,” also published in 1820.

Stanza 1: The correct reading of the second line can be derived, for those uninitiated in military jargon, by referring to the title of Tennyson’s most abjectly chauvinistic poem, which I have plundered for most of the lines of the stanza. (Those still laboring under the influence of T.S. Eliot’s dogma concerning the dissociation of sensibility may substitute for Tennyson’s ruminations the following concluding lines, drawn in part from the sworn testimony of our hero himself: “His campaign proved a dud, / Died face down in the mud: / This loose cannon now points farther north.”) By laying under contribution a paegyrlic commemorating the worst debacle in British military history prior to Gallipoli, I intend no slight to our national contributions to the genre; it is merely that Tennyson’s numbers are more easily subverted to anapests than those of, say, J. S. Carwell’s “In Memoriam” (1876):

The chieftan's voice is hushed in death.
   The trooper's battle-cry
No more shall make the welkin ring,
   Or enemy defy.
They nobly lived and bravely died
   In honor, glory, fame.
All hail! the Seventh Cavalry,
   And Custer's honored name.

Moreover, in the aftermath of LtCol Custer’s exploits at the Little Bighorn, the most effusive outpourings of mingled jingoism and horror were reserved for canvas, not verse. Upon viewing a 22x12-foot painting of the last stand by John Mulvany, a Mr. Walt Whitman of Boston was moved to remark in the pages of the New York Tribune: “Altogether a Western, autochthonic phase of America, the frontiers, culminating typical, deadly, heroic to the uttermost; nothing in the books like it, nothing in Homer, nothing in Shakespeare; more grim and sublime than either, all native, all our own, and all a fact” (in Judson Elliot Walker, Campaigns of General Custer, 1881). In the Red Rock Cafe in Miles City, Montana, hangs a painting of the final moments on the grassy knoll, in the characteristic apotheosizing style; overhead swarm Jennies, P-38s, Flying Fortresses, F-16s, and assault choppers.
Stanza 2: For Guy Fawkes, see Joseph H. Preston, “Plot, Paranoia, and Popular Festivals” in the Fall 1986 issue of this journal.

Stanza 5: I have conveniently forgotten just where in the State of Washington Richard Secord and Albert Hakim invested the proceeds of the Hawk missile sales: the rhyme scheme requires that I locate the timber tract in the Gifford Pinchot National Forest, where private acquisition of extensive parcels has well-established precedents. For example, the crater of Mount St. Helens belongs, thanks to nineteenth-century federal giveaways, to the Burlington Northern Railroad. My conflation of Dr. Johnson's censure of chauvinists with the seismic activity of that real estate is justified, as readers of Boswell will readily testify, by both the content and the manner of Johnson's deliverances.

Stanza 7: The slant rhymes here are offered in homage to the late master of the device, W. H. Auden, whose memory is for other reasons appropriately invoked. "A Marine's Hymn": The Offenbach melody to which the original version is set will do double duty. For the protracted tale of the United Fruit Company's role in determining our national policy in Central America, see Ramparts, passim.

A Marine's Hymn

From the hills of Nicaragua to the shores of Old Farsi,
We will pick our country's battles, just the NSC and me.
We will fight for our residuals, keep bananas duty free: Congress tried, it can't restrain us: the United Fruit Marines.