

LIGHT OCCASIONS

EDWARD MENDELSON

Kingsley Amis has worked so hard to give this anthology its already disastrous reputation that one is surprised to find how excellent parts of it really are. In his prepublication interviews, his introduction, and his selections for the opening and closing pages, where most readers look first, Mr. Amis has taken pains to create the impression that his book fits Eliot's description of *The Waste Land* as "a piece of rhythmical grumbling." *The Waste Land* was something of an anthology also, and both Eliot and Mr. Amis do much of their grumbling in different poets' voices. In Mr. Amis's selections from the late eighteenth and the nineteenth century, however, the grumbling manages to be very funny; and the hundred and fifty pages devoted to this period comprise a model anthology of a narrow range of light verse. The publishers should have issued it separately.

Perhaps nervousness makes Mr. Amis grumble so much. In the introduction he casts many worried looks back at the man he calls—a paragraph before actually naming him—his "illustrious predecessor." This was W. H. Auden, who compiled the first *Oxford Book of Light Verse* in 1938. The two books have almost nothing in common beyond their titles. (The word *English* in Mr. Amis's title was added by the New York office of the publisher; Mr. Amis doesn't think much of Americans and could find only a half-dozen or so worthy American writers of light verse.) Each editor has worked from an entirely different conception of "light verse." Amis is admittedly unclear about his own ideas on the subject—he says he compiled the anthology before he bothered to define what he was looking for—and, while he is fairly confident that Auden's definition of light verse was wrong, he is vague about what that definition actually was.

Amis's difficulty is not entirely his own fault. Auden confused matters by using the wrong title. He was not compiling a book of verse that might correspond to collections of, say, light novels or light operas, in the ordinary sense of those terms. He meant something very different by "light" verse, something that included serious, even harrowing poems. In his introduction he provided, as he usually did, a numbered list of categories, as if he were a schoolmaster at the blackboard. His first two categories of light verse were these:

Kingsley Amis, editor. *The New Oxford Book of English Light Verse*. Oxford University Press, 1978. xxxiv + 348 pages. \$13.95.

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- (1) Poetry written for performance, to be spoken or sung before an audience (e.g. Folk-songs, the poems of Tom Moore).
- (2) Poetry intended to be read, but having for its subject-matter the everyday social life of its period or the experiences of the poet as an ordinary human being (e.g. the poems of Chaucer, Pope, Byron).

This includes a great deal, but it excludes a great deal also. It excludes most of the romantic tradition, and all poetry that through deliberate difficulty and obscurity divides its potential audience into cognoscenti and canaille. It excludes poems written to give voice to visionary acts of imagination, poems about interior psychological states, and poems about poetry itself. There is not much room here for Milton, Shelley, or Keats. Auden's anthology does include virtually every other major English poet, but it represents them by works that concern shared or common experience: not Hamlet's soliloquies, but the blessings over the marriage bed of Theseus and Hippolyta. There are large selections from many generations of Anon.: medieval songs, broadside ballads, spirituals, jazz lyrics, limericks.

The poetry that Auden's introduction defines, and which his anthology more cogently exemplifies, has for a long time been under a critical cloud. Neither of the two major critical schools currently fighting it out in the quarterlies—the old New Criticism and the new structuralists and deconstructionists, whose mutual enmity illustrates Freud's phrase about the "narcissism of small differences"—is willing to acknowledge that great art can exist in any other way than in ironic self-enclosed autonomy or in the disembodied realm of rhetoric and signs. Recent theoretical criticism has no means of understanding any art that exists in a necessary relationship with the audience for whom that art is performed or the occasion for which it is made. The realm of such art is vast. In literature it includes both Homer and Shakespeare, as well as every other author who ever composed for an audience that existed before he got there, and for an occasion that would have occurred even if he hadn't composed a poem about it. The meaning of the work of these poets *includes* the aspects of audience and occasion, and no reading of such work can fail to take these facts into account. (A private reader is incidentally not the same as a socially defined audience; recent work in reader-theory is more an extension of the New Criticism than a turn away from it.) Even if literary theory now prefers, on the whole, to ignore these matters, art criticism provides a fascinating model of what can be accomplished. Michael Baxandall's pioneering work *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth Century Italy* takes the paintings it studies out of the timeless value-free setting of a museum gallery and shows them to be "light" in Auden's

sense of the word: their meanings intimately joined to the social, educational, and economic realms to which they refer, even in such matters as the painter's choice of color and proportion.

Auden's anthology implies that much poetry ought to be read in similar ways: in terms of its *occasions*. What Auden calls light verse proves to be, in the largest sense of the term, *occasional poetry*. This means not only poetry written for or about state occasions like Cromwell's return from Ireland or the death of the Duke of Wellington, but verse written for any event whose importance for the audience does *not* depend on the fact that a poet has written about it. Occasional poetry concerns matters that exist independently of the poet's imagination, no matter how intense the poet's response to the event may be. Occasions, in this large sense, include any social event, any event experienced in a more or less similar way by everyone: birth, courtship, marriage, death, work, education, worship, eating and drinking, the entertainment of children or friends. Occasional poetry need not refer only to specific and unique historical events, but may also refer to what might be called "generic occasions," occasions that repeat themselves over time, as in the case of mnemonics or children's games, of work songs or learned jokes for the common room, or of hymns. All that is essential is that the occasion *not* be an act of poetic imagination. What follows, among other things, is that the poem will display not the "organic form" of an autonomous object, but the conventional form appropriate to familiar events and shared occasions.

It is of course possible to speak of a "private occasion," but this has the same paradoxical, ambiguous status as a private language. Shelley's encounter with Mont Blanc is one such private occasion; Stevens's placing a jar on a smaller eminence in Tennessee is another. In each case it is an act of imagination that gives rise to the poem, not an event independent of the poet. All this does not imply that the tradition of occasional poetry excludes poems that have no occasions. Even these are accommodated. Auden referred to them in his third category of light verse: "Such nonsense poetry as, through its properties and technique, has a general appeal (Nursery rhymes, the poems of Edward Lear)." In the tradition of occasional poetry all sense is shared or *common* sense. Where there is no shared sense, there is no sense at all: hence nonsense. Even the most purposive and coherent societies must include moments of isolation or frivolity, and these are the "occasions" of nonsense poetry. In the opposing tradition, where poems arise from acts of the imagination, such moments of isolated unfettered mental activity, away from the shared social realm, generate, in contrast, not nonsense but serious poems of contemplation or sublimity.

A social occasion requires a social group that shares it. Auden's anthology tried to accommodate the full range of groups that composed

verse in English, from illiterate American slaves to Oxbridge dons. "Frankie and Johnny" sits only a few pages away from a quadrilingual prosodic joke by Robert Bridges. The spectacle of so many mutually uncommunicative groups, each writing its own special sorts of verse, may have been what led Auden to conclude his introduction with a hopeful vision of some future social democracy, where all might share the same degree of freedom and consciousness, and where all poetry, even the most sophisticated, could be "light." 1938 was not the best year for such visions. Auden's social fantasy was partly a charm against the impending European catastrophe, partly a protest against the increasing isolation of modernist writing; but it prompted, from certain quarters, praise for his book as a "revolutionary anthology." Kingsley Amis reminds us that Auden's hope has not been fulfilled, and expresses the wish that his own anthology may be regarded as a "reactionary" one.

This reminder and hope miss the point. The difference between the two books is the difference not between revolution and reaction, but between expansiveness and provinciality. When Mr. Amis sounds nervous about his "illustrious predecessor" he comes closer to the truth about their relation than when he disputes him. The new anthology proves, in the end, how right the old one was. Amis doesn't seem to be aware of the fact, but he confirms Auden's definition of light verse, by compiling an anthology of poetry that amuses the social group of which he happens to be a member. It is one group among many, and Amis's anthology is a mirror image of its group portrait. To judge from that mirror image, the group is pleased with its privilege and position, but is uneasy about maintaining them, and resents the physically and metrically unkempt masses who may wish to share them. It is a group that carefully keeps up with fashions it thinks it opposes. Most of its members seem to drink too much (their faces show it), and they feel a baffled resentment about their sex lives. They like "in" jokes. They don't like foreigners. Some members of the group were born into it; many, perhaps most, arrived along Mr. Amis's own route from Lucky Jim to unlucky Toryism. When they read Auden's 1938 motto of *Socialism, Democracy, Equality*, their response is a knowing disdain. They tend, however, to keep quiet about their own motto, which reads: *I'm on board the lifeboat; now we can pull up the ladder.*

As long as Mr. Amis entertains himself and his friends with selections from their eighteenth- and nineteenth-century ancestors, he can amuse all his other readers as well. During that period Amis's party wrote verse that, if often exasperated, was not yet embittered. Erotic poetry then restricted itself to the civilized rituals of courtship and the marriage market; direct sexual feelings, with all their potential for

trouble, kept away from the field of light verse. Amis's selections from this period achieve the ideal anthologist's balance of familiarity and surprise. He includes, for example, all the requisite verse from the "Alice" books, and adds the little-known family satire "Hiawatha's Photographing," which deserves immortality. He makes some gratifying discoveries: social verse from H. J. Byron and Godfrey Turner, and unfamiliar poems by major poets. He has a superb scholar's joke by A. E. Housman in the form of an all-too-plausible "translation" from Greek tragedy. There are many pages of W. M. Praed, whose "Good Night to the Season" is the anthology's centerpiece, followed in later pages by modern imitations; also included is the anonymous and equally central "The Vicar of Bray."

The rituals and values alter in the twentieth century. Amis's concluding pages are grim. The selection becomes erratic, and the earlier brisk sense of social stratification and custom shades into mere resentment. As he nears the immediate present, he gets even gloomier, and entirely omits the best light verse written in England in the past twenty years, verse that might be described as good-natured erotic. (He includes some bad-natured erotic instead.) Gavin Ewart, whose skill in erotic comedy flowers as he grows older, is represented only by the early overfamiliar "Miss Twye"; John Fuller, whose "Art of Love" could have brightened these final pages considerably, only by a minor verse exercise, a song written entirely in three-letter words (which Amis doesn't bother to explain). The omissions from Ewart and Fuller leave Amis with plenty of room for an "in" joke: extensive selections from the works of Victor Gray and Ted Pauker, both of whom are Amis's friend and collaborator Robert Conquest. The Oxford press deserved better from its editor.

At the other end of literary history, Amis devotes twenty pages to light verse from Shakespeare to Defoe and nothing at all to earlier centuries. (Auden devoted half of his book to the period before 1800.) There is no Chaucer, no Dunbar, no Skelton, no Herrick. Amis justifies these omissions by offering an outline history of light verse in which he traces the origin of the genre to a mythical battle between, on the one hand, a new seriousness in Milton and Dryden and, on the other, a subversive counterthrust from poets like Butler and Rochester who thus first established a tradition of deliberately amusing poetry. Amis has never claimed to be a historian. A better explanation for the limits of his taste is the fact that attitudes like his own emerged relatively recently, and therefore poems that are congenial to those attitudes are not much to be found before the eighteenth century.

Nonetheless, within the boundaries of his taste, Mr. Amis has compiled quite a good anthology; but there are large fields outside those boundaries. His book displays the narrow strengths of his talent; his

predecessor's book displayed the range and power of genius. The Oxford University Press, which apparently commissioned the new book as a replacement for the old, has chosen to keep both of them in print.

VESSELS OF EXPERIENCE

ALAN BELL

"Dear Reader, haven't you had enough?" Quentin Bell once prefaced an exhibition catalogue about the Bloomsbury group some three years ago. His own two-volume biography of his aunt Virginia Woolf had been a notable contribution to the flood of "Bloomsbury" books, and it occupies so well-established a place as both primary and secondary source that it is difficult to remember that the biography was published as recently as 1972. It had been preceded, however, by the five volumes of Leonard Woolf's autobiography (1960-1969), Michael Holroyd's two-volume *Lytton Strachey* (1967-1968), and a spate of books about the Strachey circle. For a time the British market seemed to be flooded with Bloomsburiana in a profusion usually reserved for Christmastide biographies of the royal family. The quality was variable, with some third-rate flyblown manuscripts at last finding a publisher, but with others as good and important as Jeanne Schulkind's *Moments of Being* (Sussex University Press, 1976), an edition of Virginia Woolf's unpublished autobiographical writings. Even while Quentin Bell was suggesting that there might be a superfluity, many

John Lehmann, *Virginia Woolf and Her World*. Harvest, 1977. 128 pages. \$4.95 pb; Jean O. Love, *Virginia Woolf: Sources of Madness and Art*. University of California Press, 1978. xiv + 380 pages. \$14.95; Roger Poole, *The Unknown Virginia Woolf*. Cambridge University Press, 1978. vi + 286 pages. \$11.95; Phyllis Rose, *Woman of Letters: A Life of Virginia Woolf*. Oxford University Press, 1978. xxii + 298 pages. \$12.95; George Spater and Ian Parsons, *A Marriage of True Minds: An Intimate Portrait of Leonard and Virginia Woolf*. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1977. xiv + 210 pages. \$12.95. Harvest, \$5.95; *The Diary of Virginia Woolf—Volume I: 1915-1919*, edited by Anne Olivier Bell. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1977. xxviii + 356 pages. \$12.95; *Volume II: 1920-1924*, edited by Anne Olivier Bell with Andrew McNeillie. 1978. xii + 372 pages. \$12.95; *The Letters of Virginia Woolf—Volume II: 1912-1922*, edited by Nigel Nicholson and Joanne Trautmann. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976. xxviii + 626 pages. \$14.95. Harvest, \$5.95; *Volume III: 1923-1928*. 1978. xxiv + 600 pages. \$14.95; *Volume IV: 1929-1931*. 1979. xxii + 442 pages. \$14.95.

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