THE LIMERICK

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And so gentlemen another year begins. I think that it is reasonable to say that all of us have some degree of concern that our presentation will be interesting to the members and well received. Perhaps especialy so when one is delivering the inital offering for the new year of the Holland (Men's) Professional Club. Once we get over the hump of admitting women maybe we could tackle the question of admitting non-professionals at the next September meeting. President and Doctor Sterken (a double professional) had asked me to deliver this inaugral address not because of any special talent but because all of the other scheduled speakers either refused or could not attend tonight's meeting. Being of an obliging nature I agreed before our last meeting. Hours before. I agreed because I had long ago decided what my topic would be tonight. Setting the tone for the new year is a serious business but little did I know that the discussion of last month concerning those of the XY persuasion would make the delivery so urgent. As it turns out I may be presenting material that would be considered unfit for the feminine ear.
The topic of this evening is the Limerick. Why the limerick? Well truth be told for no perticular reason other than the fact that I could not remember hearing a talk which dealt with literary criticism other than the excellent talk by John Hollenback in the recent past on the spy novel. Certainly there has not been a recent discussion of poetry and in keeping with the high level of intellectual

pursuit enjoyed by this organization I thought that a discussion of bawdy doggerel would be called for. Being of limited academic potential, I did not pretent to be able to delve into the intricacies of early nineteenth century poetry (if there were any) nor would I expect an appreciative audience. But in the face of papers on geological history, disarmament, Star Battles, business and commerce not to mention fly tying and other weighty topics, I thought it best to try to begin the new year on a lighter note.

Consider the limerick for a moment. I have always been impressed when an individual can quote at length any piece of literature. When the recitation is humorous the effect is almost irresistible. A collection of limericks delivered end to end can be awe-inspiring. I learned this when a friend of mine did just that while driving the width of Indiana. Or they can be disarming if not charming when offered at the least expected moment. Twelve years ago as a new and apprehensive surgical intern at the Massachusetts General Hospital, I was called to assist a world renown surgeon and Professor of Surgery at the Harvard Medical School. A man known for formidable talents with a temper and tongue to match. After scrubbing into the case and taking my position across a sea of intestines he said, "What's your name, boy?" To which I replied Bates (of course). "Bates, huh." "Yes sir" "Chicago, right" "Yes, sir" "Bates, huh. Well. Huh. There once was a sailor named

Bates, Who used to Watuzi on skates, He fell on his cutlass, and hence he was nutless, and practically useless on dates" In this fashion began a rewarding professional relationship. This is not intended as a serious foray into literary criticism and feel free to take all or most of this evening under advisement but there are some points which I would like to make.

The limerick is known to nearly everyone but its paternity admitted by very few. It has held its place now for about one hundred years as the chosen vehicle of supposedly cultivated and unrepressed sexual humor in the English language. As almost nothing of a serious nature has been written about the limerick, I thought that it would benefit us to delve into its nature and history.

The limerick by definition is a verse form composed of five lines rhying aabba of which the first, second and fifth are trimeter and the third and fourth are dimeter. The dominant rhythm is anapestic (two short and one long sylable) with the final line often a repetition or varied repetition of the first.

It is unique in that it is the only English stanza form used exclusively for light verse. It is not to be confused with the clerihew or nonsense verse. The clerihew is named after Edmund C.(for Clerihew) Bently (1875-1956) who began writing them at age sixteen. They represent two coupletsof unequal length with a complex or ridiculous rhyme and represent a potted biography of a famous personage

or historical character. The humor of the clerihew consists of concentrating on the trival, the fantastic or the ridiculous and presenting it in a dead pan fashion with solemnity as the characteristic, the significant or the essential.There is celebration of the non-sequitor and it indirectly satirizes academic pedantry. Bently's first clerihew was "Sir Humphrey Davy, Detested gravy, He lived in the odium, Of having discovered sodium". By the way Bently became famous for writing what is considered by some the perfect dective novel TRENT'S LAST CASE and died having published three volumes of clerihews.

Nonsense poetry is best represented by the poem "Jabberwocky" -- "Twas brillig and the slithy toves, Did gyre and gimble in the wabe ....."

Getting back to limericks, however, its modern origins are unclear. One school dates them back to the era around 1700 and attributes the form to an old French form brought back to the Irish town of Limerick by returning veterans from the French Wars. Another school attributes their modern beginnings to early nursery rhyms and refers to a 1719 volume entitled MOTHER GOOSE MELODIES FOR CHILDREN. They are clearly seen in their modern form in two volumes by one R.S. Sharpe entitled THE HISTORY OF SIXTEEN WONDERFUL OLD WOMEN (1821) and ANECDOTES AND ADVENTURES OF FIFTEEN GENTLEMEN (1822). The form seems to have lain fallow in the nineteenth century until Edward Lear published his BOOK OF NONSENSE in 1846. He listed to two previous

titles as his inspiration. Lear is considered by those of Puritanical turn as the master of the limerick form although I would disagree. In truth, he is the author of many insipid limericks which are often used to illustrate the form such as "There was and old man of the Dee, Who was sadly annoyed by a flee, When he said, 'I will scratch it', They gave him a Hatchet, Which greived that Old Man of the Dee".

I would propose that the limerick is and was originally and indecent verse-form. The "clean" limerick, popular in the mid-19th century and beyond was an obvious palliation with insipid content full of frustrate nonsence.

~~content, artifical rhyming and full of frustrated nonsense. They are still seen on occasion as the pursuit of elderly maidens, in digests for readers unwilling or unable to read the whole and insipid elderly gentlemen.~~

Several notable authors have made their comments on the limerick including Arnold Bennett who was asked to comment on and provide examples of clean limericks. He wrote "In reply to your letter, all I have to say about Limericks is that the best ones are entirely unprintable". He, infact, nominated the one about the Young Plumber of Leigh as the best limerick of all (There was a young plumber of Leigh, Who was plumbing a girl by the sea. She said, "Stop your plumbing, There's somebody coming!" Said the plumber, still plumbing, "It's me".) George Bernard Shaw is quoted as saying "....they are mostly unfit for publication. They must be left for oral tradition...." An unusual choice of words ~~statement that~~ coming from Mr. Shaw. The best comment ~~from~~ this side of the Atlantic has come form Don Marquis who divided limericks into three catagories; "Limericks to be told when ladies are present; limericks to be told when ladies are absent but clergymen are present and LIMERICKS". In short, the depraved nature oflimericks could be summed up in a clean limerick "The limerick is furtive and mean; You must keep her in close quarantine, Or she sneaks to the slums, And promply becomes, Disorderly, drunk and obscene."

TP The ~~original~~ modern limerick fad was accidently created by the book first published in 1846 by Edward Lear entitled the

I mentioned

BOOK OF NONSENSE, ~~and~~ It was reprinted in 1863 in London. It proved appreciable to be a financial success and the fad was taken up and expanded upon by PUNCH the English humor magazine. In the United States, a Charles Godfrey Leland imitated Lear and published a collection entitled YE BOOK OF COPPERHEADS. It was entirely satirical and directed against Northern "copperhead" defeatists and the anti-Lincoln agitations during the Civil War. A later and larger version was shortly published and sold by the Sanitary Commission which was the Red Cross of the Civil War to support their activities. With this the limerick fad was begun in the United States under the name of nonsense and nursery rhymes. Also ~~at~~ this time the term limerick began to be applied to the form. ~~The origin of the name is unknown having been appropriated from that of the town in Ireland for reasons never really explained.~~ ~~Let me return to the~~ pre ~~history of limerick.~~

The limerick metre was, ~~in fact,~~ very commonly used in songs in teh Irish language, usually dedicated to liquor, love or patriotism throughout the eighteenth century. The ~~form also~~ appears in English inb the Irish songs of Thomas Moore in the ~~early 19th century, such as "The Young May Moon"~~ (~~Oxford Book of English Verse #582~~)

~~In any case,~~ Imitations of popular limericks came thick and fast after the lAmeriacan Sanitary Commission volume of 1864 in the form of such titles as INKLINGS FOR THINKLINGS and YE BOOK OF BUBBLES.

PUNCH ~~was similarily~~ ran ~~running~~ many clean ~~and foolish~~ limericks in their issues and might have gone on doing so forever except that the fad of the clean limerick came to an abrupt end -- owing largly to a disconcerting number of bawdy and sacrilegious limericks ~~being~~ submitted anonymously to contests run by the magazine. According to tradition, the leaders of this anti-fad, and authors of all the best early dirty limericks, which of course immediately began to circulate orally, were a group of college wits and clubmen, notably the poet Swinburne and an army Capt. by the name of Edward Sellon. Punch closed down its contests and the clean-limerick fad fell dead. Since that time the clean limerick has lived on fitfully only as the last resort of newspaper poets hard up for witty fillers and as advertising pap. As an "authentic" folklore and oral tradition ~~of~~ the limerick during its ~~century of~~ modern exsistence since the end of the Civil Was has been wholly and solely in the bawdy form.

The prehistory of the limerick is said to be remarkably easy to trace. Although somewhat different in form and stresses, the earliest limericks can be found in nursery rhymes or something like them as far back as the 14th century. It has been stated that one of the earliest recorded English popular song, SUMER IS I-CUMEN IN, is in the limerick form. It goes as follows: " Ewe bleateth after lamb, Low'th after calve coo; Bullock starteth, Bucke farteth--Merry sing Cuckoo!". Swann and Sidgwick in THE MAKING

OF VERSE discovered another early animal limerick in the British Museum's manuscripts dating from the fourteenth century: "The lion is wondirlich strong, and ful of wiles of wo; and wether he hieye other take his preye he ona not do bot slo."

A century and a half passed without further mention of this delightful form until it reappeared suddenly in the late sixteenth century in the mad-songs of the half-naked wandering beggars, turned out to mump their livelihood after 1536 when Henry VIII dissolved the religious almonries. Whether the monk learned it from the madmen or the madmen from the monks remains to be seen.

The mad "Bedlams" as they were called, were still wandering and singing two hundred year later, in both ENgland and Ireland, as recorded by the Irish poet and physician Oliver Goldsmith (who is also believed to have been the first edidator of the MOTHER GOOSE rhymes in ENglish) The greatest of these mumper's songs is "Mad Tom" or "Tom o'Bedlam". I won't quote it here as it is becoming indecipherable to modern ears. These forms were extended over the following years by the same to praise tobacco --- O metaphysical Tobacco, Fetched as far as from Morocco, Thy searching fume, Exhales the rheum, O metaphysical Tobacco" (1606) and love --"Come kisse, come kisse, my Corinna, And still that sport wee'l beginn-a, That our soules so may meet, In our lippes while tahey greet, Come kisse, some kisse, my Corinna." (1618).--- and drinking --"Shear sheep that have them, cry we still, But see that no man 'scape, To drink of the sherry, That makes us so merry, and plump as the lusty grape."

The necessary rhyming word at the end of the opening line of the true limerick, calling forth all the matching rhymes was achieved by the early 1600s and later became the standard in popular or folk level broadside ballads. Right from the beginning,however, it became obvious that the rollicking rhythm of the verse form made it difficult to convey any serious images. In addition, there remained the echo of the original madmen and rascals whose song it really was. Most formal poets scorned the possiblities of the madmen's song and its limerick metre. Shakespear's King Lear (III,iv) has Edgar, disguised as a beggar,"poore Tom", chant a spell to the rhythm of "Tom o' Bedlam" --- "Swithold footed thrice the old, He met the night mare and her nine fold, Bid her alight, And her troth plight, And aroint thee, witch, aroint thee!". At least three other passages in Shakespear are also in limerick form --- Iago's drinking song in Othello, Ophelia's mad-song in Hamlet and Stephano's sea-song in The Tempest. Two of these songs are mad-songs and two are drinking songs giving indication that the form was considered too popular or simple to be used seriously. The form can be traced through Johnson, later Herrick who attempted to use it seriously. It is ~~the English poet~~ Herrick who infact is thought to be one of the first to take the limerick form into the endlessly bitter and sardonic revelling in sexual and scatological insults and anti-woman doggerel. For example his "Upon Jone and Jane" --- Jone is a wench that's painted,Jone is a Girle

that's tainted; Yet Jone she goes Like one of those Whom purity had Sainted. Jane is a Girle that's prittie, Jane is a wench that's wittie; Yet, who would think Her breath do's stinke, As so it doth? that's pittie. Further writting by Corbet removed the limerick rhythm almost completely from the use of madmen, lovers, and tobacco - addicts, to personal satire and in this general arena it has principally remained. A reading of the popular literature of this time would suffice to show that the concentration on veral obscenity and scatology imagined by many to be a modern invention or perversion of limerick form was already in florid cultivation in the seventeenth century. A particular element which entered thelimerick at theis time was the satirical use of proper names and places to set the opening rhyme or in other rhyming positions. Many limerick rhyme were made concerning the RUMP parliament of the English Revolution and Restoration ~~and In~~dividuals became objects of satire. For example "Here comes Sir Henry Martyn, As good as ever pist, This wenching beast, Had whores at least, A thousand on his list." Even the stressed iambic opening of many modern limericks appears in the 17th century as in "There was a Lady lov'd a hog.....etc."By the ~~seven~~eighteenth century, the limerick form, now recognizable in it modern form, had so often been turned to the uses and abuses of satire, in poems, and in songs of whenching, drinking and other low professions that no one could have saved it as a lyric form and Shakespear's refusal to take

it as a serious form was vindicated. ~~And~~ Eventually the form returned to whence it had arisen, again to the wandering bedlam beggars, the ancestors of our own hoboes, tramps, street and bag persons. Finally the limerick metre was abandoned altogether to the uses of nonsense and nursery rhymes-- the classic decay and descent of much folklore, of which the last traces often survive only in children's rhymes and games. It is among the nursery rhymes, following this ~~the early~~ period in the 17th century at least, that the limerick form will mainly be found as in "Hickory dickory dock ....etc."

I have tried to schetch the history of the limerick form before Edward Lear in 1848/63 and in doing so support my earlier remark that the limerick is and was originally an indecent verse form. Following the publication of Lear's BOOK OF NONSENSE which launched the modern publication of limericks in popular magazines such as Punch, there appeared anotherpublication chastely entitled A NEW BOOK OF NONSENSE. Fragments the earliest known collection of erotic limericks of the modern age and is now enshired in the British Museum. It contained the mock imprint "OXFORD:PRINITED AT THE UNIVERSITY PRESS FOR THE SOCIETY FOR PROMOTING USEFUL KNOWLEDGE. and It is thought to be the work of a collection of Oxford men, ~~who also~~ and in doing so They paid their respects to the classic erotic and satirical poet Martial.

There followed several other subterrean publications through the late 1800's which contain a large portion of the bawdy limericks still in circulation in both England and America and are considered the classics and old favorities of the genre. Their main circulation both in their own century and our own was by word of mouth in the classic folk lore fashion and certainly not by the secret and rare publications in which they were committed to print.

It is clear that, in a preponderant way, most bawdy limericks are concerned with the unconscious or unwilling humor of the sexual impluse: its organ-inferiorities, its attitudes and misadventures. The form being unrepressed, by definition, has no holds barredas to the naked hostility expressed. It is curious how much of this sexual hostility, in the frankly bawdy limerick, is turned against the poet or protagonist himself, the hapless hero with whose disasters and phallic insufficiencies the limerick poeta so clearly identifies. There can be no doubt that this is a sort of neurotic whistling in the darkfor the people who make up the bawdy limericks and who nowdays also recite them; at tempting to laugh away their sexual fears and impotencies -- real and imagined-- in short satirical efforts of elaborate rhyme in which women are the usual butt of the satire. As a literary expression of moral repression the form became an underground showcase and receptacle of all the most repellant erotic imaginings, the most scatogoical

satire and aggression, and the sickest sexual fears and fantasies of the nineteenth and twentieth century. And it was passed off as wit among the better educated and presumably more cultivated classes.

Far from being some victory for folk-poetry and unexpurgated giety the modern form perhaps represents the inevitiable and unhealthy result of centuries of repression and censorship. Perhaps there are more recent parellels in todays society. The recent relative collapse of censorship has not resulted in the intended freedom from censorship of sexual normality but rather as a shooting permit for all the old degeneracies that every rational person was hoping to be rid of. The residue of centuries censorship is exactly this; that the new and partial literary freedom is immediately seized upon and exploited by the Gangsters of new freedom strictly as the freedom to print, propagandize for and gloat ovear all the most nauseating details of sadistic intent which had originally appeared in literature and probably in life as an escape from that censorship and it repression.

And so the limerick has become an antiquarian delight. A verse form which every wit and glad handing public relations pundit of the old school had in his stock of jokes. The titillation of dealing with the fringe of normal sexual behavior and attitude has become the domain of much more obvious forms as the full page full color photograph and the wide screen movie. Perhaps several centuries from now our descentants will look back upon the pornography of today and view it as quaintly as we now view the indecencies of the late Victorian age.