A SAMPLER OF ANGLO-AMERICAN PROVERB POETRY

Wolfgang Mieder

The use and function of proverbs in literature have been the subject of numerous scholarly investigations, ranging from collections and interpretive remarks concerning proverbial materials in the works of classic authors like William Shakespeare, François Rabelais, or Johann Wolfgang von Goethe to analyses of proverbs in lesser-known regional writers.[1] Such studies have always concentrated on prose and dramatic literature, while lyrical poetry has been neglected for what appear to be obvious reasons. Somehow lyrical verses seem not to be suitable for bits of prosaic wisdom, and yet there does exist a considerable amount of proverbial poetry, or paremiological verse to use a more technical term, in Anglo-American, French, German,[2] and other languages.

An early medieval French example that comes to mind is the **Ballade des proverbes** by François Villon (c. 1431-after 1463) in which the poet lists twenty-eight proverbs of the pattern "Tant . . . que" in four stanzas. Since the proverbs are not contextually linked, it is actually more a small proverb collection than a poem with meaningful content. The first stanza clearly shows the mere enumeration of the proverbs:

Tant grate chievre que mal gist,
Tant va le pot a l'eaue qu'il brise,
Tant chauffe on le fer qu'il rougist,

Tant le maille on qu'il se debrise,
Tant vault l'homme comme on le prise,
Tant s'eslongne il qu'il n'en souvient,
Tant mauvais est qu'on le desprise,
Tant crie l'on Noel qu'il vient. [3]

So much a goat scratches that he spoils his bed,
so much goes the pitcher to the well that it breaks,
so much is the iron heated that it reddens,
so much is it hammered that it cracks,
so much are men worth as other men see them,
so much a man journeys that he is forgotten,
so much is he bad that he is despised,
so much does one cry out Noël that it comes.[4]

Quite a different translation from the traditional one given above is this interesting modern rendition by the Canadian poetess Phyllis Gotlieb (*1926) which overcomes the clumsiness of lining up dissimilar proverb patterns and unifying them once again through the invented English pattern "Enough -ing, you . . .":

Enough butting, you bust your head
enough dipping, the pitcher breaks
enough firing, the iron turns red
enough hammering, you get cracks
enough running and you make tracks
enough goodness, you'll pull out plums
enough naughtiness, you get smacks
enough calling and Christmas comes[5]

This stanza is therefore no longer a translation but rather an innovative adaptation, and its inclusion in a collection of personal poetry by the author is an indication that proverb poems are still of importance today.

Just as French and German late medieval literature is rich in proverbial materials, early English literary works by Geoffrey Chaucer, John Gower, and John Lydgate to name but a

few also abound in them. But the richest proverbial materials are assembled in John Heywood's (1497-1580) **A Dialogue Containing the Number of the Effectual Proverbs in the English Tongue Concerning Marriages** (1546) and in his six hundred **Epigrams upon Proverbs** (1556-1562). While the lengthy **Dialogue** (2754 lines) is in fact a commentated proverb collection of rhyming couplets, one cannot consider it a proverb poem as such. On the other hand, Heywood's many rhymed proverbial epigrams (2-40 lines) are short proverb poems of sorts, usually exemplifying a proverb in a didactic and yet at times humorous fashion:

Of Late and Never

Better late than never:
That is not true ever;
Some things, to rule in rate,
Better never than late.[6]

Of Wits

So many heads, so many wits: nay, nay!
We see many heads and no wits, some day.[7]

Praise of a Man above a Horse

A man may well lead a horse to the water
But he cannot make him drink, without he list.
I praise thee above the horse, in this matter;
For I, leading thee to drink, thou hast not missed
Alway to be ready, without resistance,
Both to drink, and be drunk, ere thou were led thence.[8]

The creation of epigrams around proverbs continued well into the seventeenth century and is still practiced today. For example, John Davies (c. 1565-1618) in his **Scourge of Folly** (1611) assembled and dedicated 418 of them to John Heywood, of which many are variants of those of Heywood as is the case with the fol-

lowing epigram based upon the already-quoted proverb "So many heads, so many wits":

> "So many heads, so many witts:" Fy, fy:
> It is a shame for prouerbs so to lye;
> For I (though mine acquaintance be but small)
> Know many heads that haue no witt at all.[9]

The obvious questioning of the proverb's one-sided wisdom in many of these epigrams resulted five years later in a small publication entitled **Crossing of Proverbs** (1616), in which Nicholas Breton (c. 1545-c. 1626) opposed each proverb by a contradictory statement in the following manner (P=proverb; C=crossing):

> P. Euery child knowes his owne father.
> C. Not, but as his mother tels him.
>
> P. Many handes make quicke worke.
> C. Not among the lazy.
>
> P. A foole is euer laughing.
> C. Not when hee is beaten, for then hee cryes.[10]

The fact that for almost every proverb there is a situation or even another proverb that will easily disprove it is a long-recognized phenomenon. The example that comes to mind immediately is "Out of sight, out of mind"--"Absence makes the heart grow fonder." Playing with such proverb oppositions is a type of verbal dueling and examples for this can be found in everyday speech occurences as well as in written form. Among the poems of Frank H. Woodstrike (twentieth century) can be found a poem that is reminiscent of the crossed proverbs of Nicholas Breton, and the title **Paradoxical Proverbs** truly captures the apparent philosophical ambiguity and absurdity when the wisdom of various proverbs is brought into contrast.

If wisdom supreme you really desire,
   Just heed the philosophers' word:
Be sure that you act as their proverbs require
   And you will be wise, or absurd.

"Look before you leap.
Hesitate and all is lost.

"Stick with the ship.
Wise rats desert a sinking ship.

"Return good for evil.
Pay him back in his own coin.

"As you sow, so shall you reap.
A bad start, a good finish.

"In peace prepare for war.
Never cross a bridge until you come to it.

"When in Rome do as Romans do.
Do only that which is right.

"An honest man cannot be bought.
Every man has his price.

"Never howl until you are hit.
A stitch in time saves nine.

"A rolling stone gathers no moss.
A setting hen lays no eggs.

"Never judge by appearances.
Every bird is known by its feathers.

"Strive not against the stream.
To reach the top you must climb the hill.

"Better half bad than all bad.
A lie that is half-truth is blackest.

"Love never dies.
When poverty enters the door, Love leaps out the window.

"Everybody feels for the under dog.
When a man is down everybody jumps on him.

"Live while you live.
Put by for a rainy day.

"It is never too late.
When a thing is lost, it is too late to lock it up."[11]

But can all the examples discussed thus far from early English to modern American literature really be called poems? In a limited sense perhaps yes, but how about the existence of poems where many proverbs or proverbial expressions are actually combined to give the resulting poem an actual meaning? There does exist a most interesting poem by an anonymous poet entitled **A Ballad of Old Proverbs** (1707) which contains twenty-seven proverbs and proverbial expressions:

A Ballad of Old Proverbs

I Prithee Sweet-heart grant me my desire,
For I am thrown as the old **Proverb** goes,
Out of the Frying-pan, into the Fire,
And there is none that pities my Woes.
Then hang or drown thy self, my Muse,
For there is not a T---d to chuse.

Most Maids prove Coy of late, tho' they seem Holier,
Yet I believe they are all of a Mind;
Like unto like, quoth the Devil to the Collier.
And they'll be true when the Devil is Blind:
Let no one trust to their desire,
For the burnt Child still dreads the Fire.

What tho' my Love as white as a Dove is,
Yet you would say, if you knew all within;
Shitten come Shite the beginning of Love is,
And for her Favour I care not a Pin:
No Love of mine she e'er shall be,
Sir-Reverence of her Company.

What tho' her Disdainfulness my Heart hath cloven,
Yet I am of so stately a Mind;
I'll not creep in her A--- to bake in her Oven,
Tho' 'tis an old Proverb, that Cat will to kind:
But I will say until I die,
Farewel and be hang'd, that's twice Good-bye.

Alas, no Enjoyments, nor Comfort I can take,
In her that regards not the worth of a Lover;
A T--- is as good for a Sow, as a Pancake:
Swallow that Gudgeon, I'll fish for another,
She ne'er regards my aking Heart,
Tell a Mare a Tale, she'll let a Fart.

Now I'm sure as my Shoe is made of Leather,
Without good advertisement and fortunate helps;
We two shall ne'er set our Horses together,
For she's like a Bear being rob'd of her Whelps:
But as for me it shall ne'er be said,
You've brought an old House over your Head.

Lo, this is my Counsel to young Men that Wooe,
Look well before you leap, handle your Geer;
For if you Wink and Shite, you'll ne'er see what you do,
So you may take a wrong Sow by the Ear:
But if she prove her self a Flurt,
Then she may do as does my Shirt.

Fall Back, or fall Edge, I never shall bound be,
To make a Match with Tag-rag, and Long-tail;
He that's born to hang, never shall drown'd be,
Best is best cheap, if you hit not the Nail:
Shall I toil Gratis in the Dirt,
First she shall do as does my Shirt.[12]

This humorous and somewhat sarcastic poem of a rebuffed lover gains its effectiveness by the many earthy and partially lewd folk expressions and is a clear indication that people have always enjoyed playing with proverbs. An even greater **tour de force** poem that literally consists of nothing but proverbs, proverbial expressions, and allusions is the following poem by the American poet Arthur Guiterman (1871-1943):

A Proverbial Tragedy

The Rolling Stone and the Turning Worm
And the Cat that looked at a King
Set forth on the Road that Leads to Rome--
For Youth will have its Fling,

The Goose will lay the Golden Eggs,
The Dog must have his Day,
And Nobody locks the Stable Door
Till the horse is stol'n away.

But the Rolling Stone, that was never known
To Look before the Leap
Plunged down the hill to the Waters Still
That run so dark, so deep;
And the leaves were stirred by the Early Bird
Who sought his breakfast where
He marked the squirm of the Turning Worm--
And the Cat was Killed by Care![13]

Guiterman succeeds in twisting and changing proverbs in such a fashion that they take on new meanings without becoming unrecognizable by the reader. The proverbial "Rolling Stone" even becomes a sort of character whose life path is described in laconic expressions to its tragic end. And his fellow travelers, the equally proverbial worm and cat, also find their destruction in a proverbially predestined fashion. The poem thus mirrors the pessimistic worldview inherent in so many proverbs, and on a more philosophical level the poem becomes an expression of the tragic beginning of World War I. The metaphorical apocalypse expressed in the poem is, therefore, much more than a playful linguistic trick.

Proverb poems of that depth are obviously rare and the Guiterman poem most likely will remain the proverb poem par excellence. One need only to compare this poem with the following collage text by the Canadian poet John Robert Colombo (*1936), who has done nothing else but take about two dozen equally structured proverbs and linking them by replacing key words by the name Ruth:

Proverbial Ruth

A good archer is known by his Ruth, not his arrows.
A good Ruth makes a good ending.
A good cause makes a stout heart and a strong Ruth.
A good Ruth makes good company.
A good Ruth needs never sneak.
A good Ruth deserves a good bone.
A good Ruth is the best sermon.
A good Ruth needs no paint.
A good fellow lights his Ruth at both ends.
A good Ruth is one-half of a man's life, and bed is the other half.
A good garden may have some Ruth.
A good Ruth is better than a bad possession.
A good Ruth should be seldom spurred.
A good Jack makes a good Ruth.
A good key is necessary to enter Ruth.
A good Ruth keeps off wrinkles.
A good Ruth is no more to be feared than a sheep.
A good Ruth is never out of season.
A good Ruth is better than gold.
A good Ruth keeps its lustre in the dark.
A good Ruth never wants workmen.
A good Ruth makes a good master.
A good Ruth is the best sauce.
A good Ruth is none the worse for being twice told.
A good tongue has seldom need to beg Ruth.
A good Ruth and health are a man's best wealth.
A good Ruth brings a good summer.
A good Ruth makes a good husband.
A good Ruth for a bad one is worth much, and costs little.[14]

Some sentences like "A good Ruth makes good company" and "A good Ruth is better than gold" make sense, but how about such anti-feminist slurs as "A good Ruth deserves a good bone," "A good Ruth needs no paint [cosmetics]," and "A good Ruth is never out of season"? The author has added a postscript to his "poem" stating that he sees it "as an ironic, playful love poem." In this light some

of the varied proverbs suddenly take on meanings, and at least parts of the poem become commentaries on modern sexual politics.

If the poem by John Colombo is an ironic reflection about love in our time, then the following text of forcefully changed proverbs by Ambrose Bierce (1842-1914) may be looked at as a satirical interpretation of man's condition as he is faced with ever more insurmountable obstacles and problems:

"Wise Saws and Modern Instances, or
Poor Richard in Reverse"

Saw, **n.** A trite popular saying or proverb. (Figurative and colloquial.) So called because it makes its way into a wooden head. Following are examples of old saws fitted with new teeth.

A penny saved is a penny to squander.
A man in known by the company he organizes.
A bad workman quarrels with the man who calls him that.
A bird in the hand is worth what it will bring.
Better late than before anybody has invited you.
Example is better than following it.
Half a loaf is better than a whole one if there is much else.
Think twice before you speak to a friend in need.
What is worth doing is worth the trouble of asking somebody to do it.
Least said is soonest disavowed.
He laughs best who laughs least.
Speak of the Devil and he will hear about it.
Of two evils choose to be the least.
Strike while your employer has a big contract.
Where there's a will there's a won't.[15]

The way Bierce changes the second half of the traditional proverb is somewhat reminiscent of some of the earlier proverbial epigrams and the crossing of proverbs, but it differs in that the change is made within the proverb text itself and the contradiction is not added as an

extra sentence. The shortness and conciseness of Birece's proverb variations might in fact lead to new proverbs, for innovations such as "A man is known by the company he organizes" and "Where there's a will there's a won't" do contain a good amount of wisdom to merit proverbial status.

But there are also lyrical poems in which only one proverb plays a major role as far as the philosophical content is concerned. In Robert Frost's (1874-1963) famous poem **Mending Wall** (1914), for example, the proverb "Good fences make good neighbors" is not merely quoted twice but the rest of the text does in fact become a critical reflection upon the traditional wisdom expressed therein.[16] In the poem Robert Frost wants to show that the unquestioning acceptance of an old proverb might in fact be detrimental to a meaningful interrelationship and communication between people. The blind repetition of the proverb by the neighbor shuts off any chance for change in neighborly relations, separating them unnecessarily for another year when it will be time again to mend the fences.

If Frost's poem is a critical analysis of the proverb, the following poem by Vincent Godfrey Burns (*1893) with the proverbial title **Man doth not Live by Bread Alone** is a poetic exemplification of the basic truth of the Biblical proverb (Matt. 4, 4):

Man doth not live by bread alone
But by each elevating thought
By which his ship of life is wrought;
Each harbor light however dim
That makes life's broad sea plain to him
Is like a searchlight from the throne--
Man doth not live by bread alone.

Man doth not live by bread alone
But by those truths which greatly feed
His hungering soul's deep spirit-need,

By inward music sweet and clear
That tunes with joy his inner ear;
Give man the food of soul, not stone--
He doth not live by bread alone.

Man doth not live by bread alone,
He hath a hunger of the heart
And cannot walk from man apart;
No living human long can stand
Without the grasp of friendly hand,
The touch, the fellowship, the voice
That make the lonely heart rejoice;
Love all our sorrows can atone--
Man doth not live by bread alone.[17]

Each stanza is enclosed by this particular proverb and this six-time repetition of the same proverb makes the intention of the author very clear. Between the proverb texts he explains such spiritual matters as thought, truth, and love by which man lives in addition to his materialistic need for bread.

Finally there are the lengthy poems such as Carl Sandburg's (1878-1967) **The People, Yes** (1936) which contains 334 proverbs on 180 pages of text.[18] In this poem Sandburg wanted to give a picture of the American people by means of their everyday language, for as he argues at the beginning of the epic poem:

The people is Everyman, everybody.
Everybody is you and me and all others.
What everybody says is what we all say.
And what is it we all say? [19]

The answer to this question is in part the many proverbs and expressions that Sandburg integrated into the text, for they express concisely apparent truths that have currency among the people of a nation.

In his shorter poem (but still too long to be reproduced here) **Good Morning, America** (1928) Carl Sandburg also incorporates many

slang and proverbial expressions, proverbs, and quotations and begins his linguistic characterization of Americans during the 1920s with the following lines:

> A code arrives; language; lingo; slang;
> behold the proverbs of a people, a nation.[20]

Sandburg enumerates the proverbs in most cases in their traditional wording, while some of the other modern poets like Arthur Guiterman, John Robert Colombo, and Ambrose Bierce tend to tamper with the traditional texts as was shown above. This difference shows the changed attitude towards proverbial wisdom of modern mankind. In an ever more sophisticated and learned society proverbs are critically questioned in regard to their validity. This questioning of the truth of proverbs was already going on in the sixteenth and seventeeth century, as was indicated by some of the examples of John Heywood, John Davies, and Nicholas Breton, who added explanatory statements for which the particular proverb does not hold true. But in more modern times it is the actual altering of the proverbial text which reflects man's dissatisfaction with some of the old proverbs. Be it in satirical or ironic proverb poems, in advertisement slogans,[21] in political speech or cartoons, the proverbial texts are more often than not changed to fit modern needs.[22] What remains is nevertheless the proverbial structure of the original proverb and a definite indication that modern man also depends on the formulaic proverb patterns for communicating effectively his thoughts and concerns. Even if many proverb peoms over the centuries have dealt critically with the proverbs, they are nevertheless a solid proof that proverbs were and continue to be important linguistic and philosophical statements.

NOTES

[1] See Wolfgang Mieder, **Proverbs in Literature: An International Bibliography** (Berne: Peter Lang, 1978).

[2] See the forthcoming article by Wolfgang Mieder on "Moderne deutsche Sprichwortgedichte" (Modern German Proverb Poems) in **Fabula.**

[3] Anthony Bonner, ed., **The Complete Works of François Villon** (New York: David McKay, 1960), p. 134. For interpretive comments see Pino Paioni, "I proverbi di Villon," **Studi Urbinati di Storia, Filosofia e Letteratura** 45(1971):1131-36 and Paul Sébillot, "François Villon," **Revue des traditions populaires** 3(1888):465-73.

[4] Bonner, p. 135.

[5] Phyllis Gotlieb, **Ordinary, Moving** (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1969), p. 28.

[6] John S. Farmer, ed., **The Proverbs, Epigrams, and Miscellanies of John Heywood** (London: Early English Drama Society, 1906; rpt. New York: Barnes and Noble, 1966), p. 227.

[7] Farmer, p. 168.

[8] Farmer, p. 175.

[9] Alexander B. Grosart, ed., **John Davies of Hereford. The Complete Works** (Edinburgh: Constable, 1878; rpt. Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1968), vol. 2, p. 44.

[10] Alexander B. Grosart, ed., **Nicholas Breton. The Works in Verse and Prose** (Edinburgh: Constable, 1879; rpt. Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1969), vol. 2, pp. 5-6.

[11] Frank H. Woodstrike, **Great Adventure** (New York: The World Publishing Company, 1937), pp. 148-49.

[12] See Charles Clay Doyle, "On Some Paremiological Verses," **Proverbium** 25(1975):979-82. Doyle annotates all proverbs so that no explanation of the more difficult texts need be given here. In his new dictionary of **Early American Proverbs and Proverbial Expressions** (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1977), 511-12, Bartlett Jere Whiting quotes an interesting and somewhat similar poem entitled "Yankee Phrases"

(1803) which is made up of proverbial comparisons.

[13] Arthur Guiterman, **The Laughing Muse** (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1915), p. 16.

[14] John Robert Colombo, **Translations from the English** (Toronto: Peter Martin, 1974), p. 27.

[15] Robert P. Falk, ed., **American Literature in Parody** (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1955), p. 27.

[16] **Complete Poems of Robert Frost** (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964), pp. 47-48. See also the analysis by George Monteiro, "'Good Fences Make Good Neighbors': A Proverb and a Poem," **Revista de Etnografia**, 16 (1972):83-88.

[17] Vincent Godfrey Burns, **Redwood and Other Poems** (Washington, D.C.: New World Books, 1952), p. 114. See a similar poem entitled "By Bread Alone" by Edna Jaques, **The Best of Edna Jaques** (Saskatoon: Modern Press, 1966), p. 50.

[18] See Wolfgang Mieder, "Proverbs in Carl Sandburg's Poem 'The People, Yes,'" **Southern Folklore Quarterly** 37(1973):15-36.

[19] **Complete Poems, Carl Sandburg** (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1950), p. 453.

[20] **Complete Poems, Carl Sandburg,** p. 328. See also Wolfgang Mieder, "'Behold the Proverbs of a People': A Florilegium of Proverbs in Carl Sandburg's Poem 'Good Morning, America,'" **Southern Folklore Quarterly** 35(1971):160-68.

[21] See Barbara and Wolfgang Mieder, "Tradition and Innovation: Proverbs in Advertising," **Journal of Popular Culture** 11 (1977): 308-319.

[22] For a detailed discussion of the proverb in modern times in all of its aspects see Wolfgang Mieder, **Das Sprichwort in unserer Zeit** (Frauenfeld: Huber Verlag, 1975).