

Witty Verse - often terse

I read somewhere that Walt Whitman's Leaves of Grass is one of the five great classics of American literature. Apparently its revolutionary mix of free verse and democratic idealism helped define a nation.

So I paid a rare visit to the US poetry section of my bookshop recently to buy it. And while there, on a whim, I also picked up a copy of The Best of Ogden Nash.

You may remember Nash from his pithy Reflection on Ice-Breaking, which advises party hosts: "Candy/ Is dandy/ But liquor/ Is quicker". This is not his shortest poem. He was even pithier on the alleged meanness of Scottish people ("No McTavish/ Was ever lavish"), and the undesirability of certain New York neighbourhoods ("The bronx?/ No thonx!"). But he wrote long works too, and even long titles, eg: Lines Addressed to a Man Making \$5,000 a Year Who Overtips a Man Making \$10,000 a Year to Make Himself Feel He's Making \$20,000 a Year.

In his own way, Nash was also a poetic revolutionary, although unlike Whitman he avoided free verse the way Free Presbyterians avoid drink. His observance of rhyme, at least, bordered on religious.

By contrast he was indifferent to the need for poems to scan, and he had a very liberal approach to spelling and grammar. The main thing was that lines would rhyme, eventually, something he would force them to do at gunpoint, if necessary.

Speaking of which, here's the opening of his poem condemning the device to which I've just resorted: "One thing that literature would be greatly the better for/ Would be a more restricted employment by authors of simile and metaphor . . ." And from the same poem: "They always say things like that the snow is a white blanket after a winter storm/ Oh it is, is it, all right then, you sleep under a six-inch blanket of snow and I'll sleep under a six-inch blanket of unpoetical material and we'll see which one keeps warm."

He was an acerbic social critic, as witnessed by Are you a Snodgrass?, in which he divides the world into two classes: the Snodgrasses and the Swozzlers. The former are polite, modest people (like us), while the latter are boorish and obnoxious (like them). Typical of the difference is: "Whatever achievements Snodgrasses achieve, Swozzlers always top them/ Snodgrasses say stop me if you've heard this, and Swozzlers stop them." He can sometimes be educational: "The one-I lama/ He's a priest/ The Two-I llama, he's a beast/ And I will bet/ A silk pyjama/ There isn't any/ Three-I llama."

But not always: "The camel has a single hump/ The dromedary, two/ Or else the other way around/ I'm never sure. Are you?" You certainly wouldn't learn much about the wombat from the poem of that name: ". . . He may exist on nuts and berries/ Or then again, on missionaries/ His distant habitat

precludes/ Conclusive knowledge of his moods/ But I would not engage the
wombat/ In any form of mortal combat."

On the other hand, I only know there is an animal called the wapiti (a large
north American stag), and have a rough idea how it moves, because of
Nash's poem, which reads in full: "There goes the Wapiti/ Hippety-hoppity!"
He writes about the scourge of roadside advertising: "I think that I shall never
see/ A billboard lovely as a tree/ Indeed, unless the billboards fall/ I'll never
see a tree at all." He questions the popularity of pet birds: "The song of
canaries/ Never varies/ And when they're moulting/ They're pretty revolting."

He wades into contemporary controversies, such as whether women should
wear trousers (this was 1931): "Sure, deck your lower limbs in pants/ Yours
are the limbs, my sweeting/ You look divine as you advance/ Have you seen
yourself retreating?"

He writes about being a father too. His themes here include the horror of
celebrating children's birthdays ("May I join you in the doghouse, Rover?/ I
wish to retire till the party's over . . ."); advice on baby presents ("A bit of
talcum/Is always walcum"); and the hostility felt by fathers of female children
towards the male babies of others (because one day): ". . . This infant whose
middle/ Is diapered still/ Will want to marry/ My daughter Jill/ Oh sweet be his
slumber and moist his middle/ My dreams, I fear, are infanticiddle."

He even writes about fathers exploiting for material the funny things their
children do: "And everything that baby says/ My daddy's sure to tell/ You must
have read my daddy's verse/ I hope he fries in hell."

In fact, he did some of his best work with children and animals. I like his poem
about the turtle: "The turtle lives twixt plated decks/ Which practically conceal
its sex/ I think it clever of the turtle/ In such a fix to be so fertile." And I love the
one about the cobra: ". . . He who attempts to tease the cobra/Is soon a
sadder he, and sobra."

I'll get around to reading Whitman eventually.

TheLastStraw: Frank McNally

Dec 17th 2005

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