

HUMOR



Ogden Nash

(1902-1971)

Portrait of the Artist as a Prematurely Old Man (1934)

It is common knowledge to every schoolboy and even every Bachelor of Arts,
That all sin is divided into two parts.
One kind of sin is called a sin of commission, and that is very important,
And it is what you are doing when you are doing something you ortant,
And the other kind of sin is just the opposite and is called a sin of omission
and is equally bad in the eyes of all right-thinking people,
from Billy Sunday to Buddha,
And it consists of not having done something you shudda.
I might as well give you my opinion of these two kinds of sin as long as,
in a way, against each other we are pitting them,
And that is, don't bother your head about sins of commission because however sinful,
they must at least be fun or else you wouldn't be committing them.
It is the sin of omission, the second kind of sin,
That lays eggs under your skin.
The way you get really painfully bitten
Is by the insurance you haven't taken out and the checks you haven't added up the stubs
of and the appointments you haven't kept and the bills you
haven't paid and the letters you haven't written.
Also, about sins of omission there is one particularly painful lack of beauty,
Namely, it isn't as though it had been a riotous red-letter day or night
every time you neglected to do your duty;
You didn't get a wicked forbidden thrill
Every time you let a policy lapse or forgot to pay a bill;
You didn't slap the lads in the tavern on the back and loudly cry Whee,
Let's all fail to write just one more letter before we go home,
and this round of unwritten letters is on me.

No, you never get any fun
Out of the things you haven't done,
But they are the things that I do not like to be amid,
Because the suitable things you didn't do give you a lot more trouble than
the unsuitable things you did.
The moral is that it is probably better not to sin at all, but if some kind of sin
you must be pursuing,
Well, remember to do it by doing rather than by not doing.

ANALYSIS

Ogden Nash has made form and fortune out of flouting all the rules of poetic propriety. He gains his effects by being outrageous, and the more outrageous he is, the better we like him. As when the circus clown slaps the lorguetted, big-bosomed society lady across the face with a wet fish, so when Nash does the same to the Muse, we laugh and applaud. In brief, Nash will do anything for the sake of a rhyme. He will distort grammar, distort syntax, distort meter, distort pronunciation, distort spelling, and distort sense. And when he comes up at last with the rhyme, we are so pleased with the effrontery and ingenuity by which he has done it that we cheer.

But Nash is not only a poetic clown. Like all good writers of light verse, he is also an astute observer of the social scene. He has a nice eye for the differences between male and female, parents and children, young and middle-aged, rich and financially embarrassed. He has a comic penchant for dividing men into two classes, as he does in this poem with sin. He is a hilarious delineator of social types. Though obviously himself a man of extraordinary talent, he wins our sympathy as a spokesman for the ordinary man, comfort-loving, lazy, easily baffled, possessed of many failings, yet sorely annoyed by the failings of others. In Nash we get an indulgent but perceptive portrait of ourselves. He convicts us of sins of omission, but lets us know that he too is a sinner. His poem, indeed, is a self-portrait.

Laurence Perrine
100 American Poems of the Twentieth Century
(Harcourt 1966)
with James M. Reid