

THE GOOSE STEPPING MARTINET or 'Fixodent' on Parade

by

Willard Thurston

A friend's recent interest in the very earnest Noam Chomsky reminded me of one of my indices of civilization: humour, particularly self parody. In Shakespeare's Julius Caesar, Cassius's 'lean hungry look' does not sit well with Caesar. He confides to Mark Anthony, 'He (Cassius) thinks too much, such men are dangerous.' As if to rub it in, a soothsayer warns Caesar to beware the Ides of March.* Yet an imperious Caesar dismisses the warning, as well as a similar premonition from his perceptive wife, Calpurnia.

Well, the lean hungry intellects in history haven't always been lean, but they all have had a look that suggests you keep the Snickers under wraps. My own intellectual hit list — which includes mavens like Hegel, Rousseau, Marx, Ibsen, Brecht, Bertrand Russell, Sartre and Lillian Hellman (the short list) — are not celebrated for their sense of humour nor their restraint in tarring their critics alive or dead. They share a formidable intensity. Intellectual jack boots on parade I sometimes think. In better softer leather maybe, yet treading very heavily and noisily. No kidding or fooling around. At least in public. When I look at the faces of North Korean soldiers goose-stepping in the P'yongyang parades, I sense phalanx after phalanx of utopians on the move, their molars jouncing up and down (some undoubtedly have partials) as their boots collide with pavement reality. As an early teacher said, you have to take yourself seriously to learn to goose step.

But then I recall Soviet soldiers high stepping in high soft leather boots near the Lenin Mausoleum (on a recent trip) and realized that their elevated, slow-mo step (so unlike the flinty jumpy Koreans) looked

like the act of a ballet enthusiast — the calculated, slightly raised heel on the leg supporting the fluent soaring leg. If you have a quartet of such Baryshnikovs performing about a civic square you’ve got an audience. The effort is certainly stupendous — spry lads keeping up the slow rising lifts for an hour or more. It was a revelation the first time I saw it live.

Still. The snickers aren’t far off. For instance, John Cleese found marching so — as he did with surprising proficiency in at least one Monty Python skit — very bankable. After visiting the Lenin Mausoleum Bob Hope wondered what the custodians did for an encore. He got few laughs, apparently. Humour, particularly parody, takes a bit of getting used to in grave international forums. It reminds you that God too may suffer, as Samuel Beckett thought, from an imperfect sense of humour. Both the Bible and the Quran do keep the wisecracks to a minimum. As do our age’s Social Justice Warriors who regularly trash the Christian bible. Though, so far, the Quran gets a pass.

An old headline in the New York Times — ‘Goose Population Gains High Level’ — got Ogden Nash thinking about his own special high steppers.

Besides pollution and erosion
 We now must face a goose explosion.
 A glut of geese can play the devil
 With national life at every level,
 Especially in politics,
 Where geese and government intermix.
 Thus this solemn thought I introduce:
 The higher the level, the bigger the goose.

*The ‘Ides of March’, a potent of doom, refers to the fifteenth day of March, May, July and October, and the thirteenth day of the other months in the ancient Roman calendar.