

The Love Sonnets of a Car Conductor

Wallace Irwin

Table of Contents

<u>The Love Sonnets of a Car Conductor</u>	1
<u>Wallace Irwin</u>	2
<u>Introduction</u>	4
<u>The Love Sonnets of a Car Conductor</u>	7
<u>Prologue</u>	8
<u>I</u>	9
<u>II</u>	10
<u>III</u>	11
<u>IV</u>	12
<u>V</u>	13
<u>VI</u>	14
<u>VII</u>	15
<u>VIII</u>	16
<u>IX</u>	17
<u>X</u>	18
<u>XI</u>	19
<u>XII</u>	20
<u>XIII</u>	21
<u>XIV</u>	22
<u>XV</u>	23
<u>XVI</u>	24
<u>XVII</u>	25
<u>XVIII</u>	26
<u>XIX</u>	27
<u>XX</u>	28
<u>XXI</u>	29
<u>XXII</u>	30
<u>Epilogue</u>	31

The Love Sonnets of a Car Conductor

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Wallace Irwin

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- Introduction
- The Love Sonnets of a Car Conductor
 - Prologue
 - I
 - II
 - III
 - IV
 - V
 - VI
 - VII
 - VIII
 - IX
 - X
 - XI
 - XII
 - XIII
 - XIV
 - XV
 - XVI
 - XVII
 - XVIII
 - XIX
 - XX
 - XXI
 - XXII
 - Epilogue

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With a harmless and instructive Introduction
by
Wolfgang Copernicus Addleburger

Professor of Literary Bi-Products
University of Monte Carlo

Muse of my native land,

Wallace Irwin

The Love Sonnets of a Car Conductor

am I inspir'd?
—Keats.

Mark what I say!
Attend me where I wheel!
—Troilus and Cressida.

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Introduction

Science may conquer the stars, but it does nothing by jumps. As a Scientist, as well as a philosopher, I am accustomed to reaching the Transcendental by winding paths. It is characteristic of me that I should have consented to preface this remarkable Sonnet Cycle only after supreme deliberation, and that I should at last have determined to speak in behalf of the Car Conductor for the following reasons:

1. As a Botanist I am fascinated by the phenomenon of Genius flourishing from bud to flower, from flower to seed.
2. As a Psychologist I am anxious to establish once and for all, both by plano-inductive and precoordinate systems of logic, the Status of Slang.

What position does Slang occupy in the thought of the world? Let us turn to Zoology for an answer.

No traces of Slang may be found among mollusks, crustaceans or the lower invertebrates. Slang is not common to vertebrate fishes or to whales, seals, reptiles or anthropoid apes—in a word, slang-speaking is nowhere prevalent among lower animals. It may, then, be definitely and clearly asserted that Slang is the natural, logical expression of the Human Race. If Man, then, is the highest of created mammals, is not his natural speech (Slang) the highest of created languages? It is generally conceded that Literature is the most exalted expression of Language. Would not the Literature, then, which employs the highest of created languages (Slang) be the supreme Literature of the world?

By such logical, irrefutable, inductive steps have I proven not only the Status of Slang, but the literary importance of these Sonnets which it is at once my scientific duty and my esthetic pleasure to introduce.

The twenty-six exquisite Sonnets which form this Cycle were written, probably, during the years 1906 and 1907. Their author was William Henry Smith, a car conductor, who penned his passion, from time to time, on the back of transfer-slips which he treasured carefully in his hat[1]. We have it from no less an authority than Professor Sznusko that the Car Conductor usually performed these literary feats in public, writing between fares on the rear platform of a Sixth Avenue car. Smith's devotion to his *Musa Sanctissima* was often so hypnotic, I am told, that he neglected to let passengers on and off—nay, it is even held by some critics that he occasionally forgot to collect a fare. But be it said to his undying honor that his Employers never suffered from such carelessness, for it was the custom of our Poet to demand double fares from the old, the feeble and the mentally deficient.

The Love Sonnets of a Car Conductor

Even as the illimitable ichor of star-dust, the mysterious Demiurge of the Universe, keeps the suns and planets to their orbitary revolutions, so must environment mark the Fas and Nefas of Genius. Plato's Idea of the Archetypal Man was due, perhaps, as much to the serene weather conditions of Academe as to the marvelous mentality of Plato. What had Job eaten for breakfast that he should have given utterance to his magnificent Lamentation? Was he the discoverer of Human Sorrow or the pioneer of Human Dyspepsia?

It is not altogether radical on my part, then, for me to assert that many of the stylistic peculiarities found in these Sonnets are attributable to the locale of their inspiration the rear platform of a Sixth Avenue car. One can plainly hear the jar and jounce of the elliptical wheels, the cry, "Step lively!" the six o'clock stampede, the lament of the strap-hanging multitude in such lines as these:

"Three days with sad skidoo have came and went,
Yet Pansy cometh nix to ride with me.
I rubber vainly at the throng to see
Her golden locks—gee! such a discontent!
Perhaps she's beat it with some soapy gent—"

Where are lines like these to be found in the Italian of Petrarch? Where has Tasso uttered an impassioned confession to resemble this:

"But when I ogle Pansy in the throng
My heart turns over twice and rings a gong"?

Of the human or personal record of William Henry Smith very little has been discovered. Looking over the books of the Metropolitan Street Railway I unearthed the following entry:

"Nov. 1, 1907:"

"W. H. Smith, conductor, discharged."

"Remarks:—Car No. 21144, William Smith, conductor, ran into large brewery truck at So. E. cor. Sixth Ave. It is reported that Smith, to the neglect of his duty, was reading poetry from a book called 'Sonnets of de Heredia' at the time of the accident. Three Italians were slightly injured by the accident, and Ethelbert Pangwyn, an actor starring in 'The Girl and the Idiot,' a musical comedy, was killed."

"Smith was held for manslaughter, but Judge O' Rafferty, who had seen 'The Girl and the Idiot,' discharged the defendant, averring that the killing of Pangwyn did not constitute a crime."

What, then, has become of this minstrel who sang the Minnelieder of the Car-barns? Like Homer, like Omar, like Sappho, like Shakespeare, he is a Voice singing out of the mists. He was but a Name to his employers; and

The Love Sonnets of a Car Conductor

his friends, if he has friends, remember him not. These Sonnets, written neatly on twenty-six violet transfer-slips, were discovered, together with a rejection blank from a leading magazine, in the Dead Letter office. According to the current folk-lore in Harlem and the Bronx, Smith is now living in California employed as a brakeman on the Southern Pacific Railroad. Some aver that Pansy fell heiress to a sausage establishment and moved to Italy with her Poet. Still others maintain that Pansy, Gill the Grip and Maxy the Firebug never existed in real life—were merely the mind-children of a Symbolist and a dreamer of dreams.

To the latter theory I incline at a scholarly angle. This Cycle may be taken, perhaps, not so much as a living record of human experience as a lofty parable sounding the key-note of all human life. Gill the Grip is the Iago, the Mefistofele, the symbolism of a malevolent destiny. Maxy the Firebug may be the Poet's interpretation of the Social Unrest, of Doubt, of progressive irresponsibility. Would it be going too far, then, to say that Pansy stands to us as the symbol of Pan-girlism—as an almost Anacreontic yearning for the type? Or may not these Sonnets be taken, in a way, as a modern Vita Nuova wherein a Sixth Avenue Alighieri calls to his Beatrice and mourns within when,

"Pansy-girl refuses to occur?"

So much for the Poet and his Purpose. Should any one of the readers of this Cycle doubt the enduring greatness of the lines, let him consider that I, Wolfgang Copernicus Addleburger, have seen fit to introduce them to immortality.

[1] Since the salary-books of the Metropolitan Street Railways show, during the year 1906, 182 conductors named Smith in their employ, 38 of whom were named William Smith and 12 William Henry Smith, it is easy for the reader to conceive my task in establishing the identity of our Poet.
W. C. A.

The Love Sonnets of a Car Conductor

The Love Sonnets of a Car Conductor

Prologue

Did some one ask if I am on the job?
I sure am to the pay-roll with my lay,
A hot tabasco-poultice which will stay
Close to the ribs and answer throb-to-throb.
Here have I chewed my Music from the cob
And followed Passion from the get-away
Past the big Grand Stand where the Pousse-Café
Christens my Muse as Jennie-on-the-Daub.

Hark ye, all marks who break the Pure Fool Law,
How I, the Windy Wonder of the Age,
Have fought the Tender Passion to a draw
And got my mug upon the Sporting Page,
Since Love and I collided at the curve
And left me with a Dislocated Nerve.

The Love Sonnets of a Car Conductor

I

Am I in bad? upon the tick of nine
Today the Pansy got aboard my ship
And sprung the Trans-Suburban for a trip.
Say, she's the shapely ticket pretty fine!
Next to her pattern Anna Held looks shine
And Lilly Russell doesn't know the grip.
But oh! she's got a deep ingrowing tip
That she must shy at honks like yours and mine.

I says to her, "Fare, please!" out loud like that,
But she pipes, "Fade, Bill, fade! you pinched my fare."
That get-back tripped your Oswald to the mat,
And yet I yelled, "Cough up here, Golden Hair!"
Eh, what? I got the zing from Pansy's orb
Which says, "Dry out now, Shorty,— please absorb!"

The Love Sonnets of a Car Conductor

II

A True McGlook once handed this to me:
When little Bright Eyes cuts the cake for you
Count twenty ere you eat the honey-goo
Which leads to love and matrimony—see?
A small-change bunk what's bats on spending free
Can't four-flush when he's paying rent for two.
The pin to flash on Cupid is 'Skidoo!'
The call for Sweet Sixteen is 23."

But say! Life looks goshawful on the stretch
Without a Ray of Sunshine in my flat,
With no one there to call me "Handsome wretch,"
And dust the fuzz and mildew off my hat.
If she was waiting at the church tonight
You'd find me there with wedding-bells all right!

The Love Sonnets of a Car Conductor

III

Pansy got on at Sixteenth Street last night,
And some one flipped a handspring in my heart.
She snickered once, "Oh look, here's Mr. Smart!"
Was I there Henry Miller? guess you're right!
I did the homerun monologue as bright
As any scrub that ever learned the art.
I plum forgot the signals, "Stop" and "Start!"
And almost wrecked the car once—guess I might!

I took one Mike six blocks beyond the place
He flagged for his. He got as red as ham
And yodelled through his apopleptic face,
"I think you're dips!" I says, "I know I am—"
When Pansy starts to send a wireless wave
She simply just can't make her eyes behave!

The Love Sonnets of a Car Conductor

IV

On every car there's always one fat coot
What goes to sleep and dreams he's paid his fare.
And when you squeak he gets the Roosevelt glare,
And hoots, "I won't be dickied with—I'll shoot!"
Then all the passengers get in and root.
Loud cheers of, "Put him off!" and "Make him square!"
Till Mr. Holdfast with an injured air
Pungles his nick and ends the bum dispute.

It's ever thus on this here rolling ball—
You've got to pop your coin to ride so far.
The yap that kicks and rings a deadhead call
Must either spend or else get off the car.
On Life's Street Railway wealth may cut the cheese,
But Death rings up and says, "Step lively, please!"

The Love Sonnets of a Car Conductor

V

"There'll be some fancy steps at Car-Barn Hall,"
Gilly the Gripman pipes me off today,
"This won't be any gabberfest—for say!
Nix but the candy goes to this here ball.
You've got to flash your union card, that's all,
To circulate the maze with Tessie May,
And all the Newport push out Harlem way
Will slip on wax till sunrise,—do you call?"

I told him that I pulled the gong for that!
If Pansy would be there 'twas was Me for It.
I'd burnish up my buttons, mop my hat,
Polish my pumps and blow in for a hit.
"All to the Fritz," says Gill, "if you get jolly
Around the curves—you're apt to slip your trolley!"

The Love Sonnets of a Car Conductor

VI

The lemon-wagon rumbled by today
And dropped me off a sour one—are you on?
I went and gave the boss a cooney con
About the Car-Barn Kick—what did he say?
"Back to your platform, Clarence light and gay,
Jingle the jocund fares, nor think upon
The larks of Harry Lehr or Bath House John,
For they are It and you are still on pay."

So I have been sky-prancing all night long
A-dragging car-conductors and their queens
Clad in their laughing-ropes to join the throng
That makes the Car-Barn function all the beans.
And say! I had a brainstorm just last trip
When I took Pansy's fare from Gill the Grip.

VII

At Midnight when I got a gasp for lunch
I mushed it for the Car-Barns just to lamp
And see the Creamy Charlies do the vamp
And swing their Fancy Floras in the crunch.
I piped my Pansy in among the bunch
And asked her would she mix it with the Champ,
Wouldn't she like to join me in a stamp?
She saw me first and stopped me with a punch.

I saw her hook a loop with Gill the Grip,
With Pinky Smith and Handsome Hank she heeled;
With all the dossy bunks she took a skip
Each time the German tune-professor spieled.
But nix with me the lightsome toe she sprung—
As Caesar said to Cassius, "Ouch! I'm stung!"

VIII

Forsooth that was a passing lusty clout
That chopped me off with Pansy—don't you fret!
There's quite a blaze inside my garret yet,
And all the Dipper Corps can't put it out.
Gilly the Grip's a pretty ricky tout—
Under the old rag-rug for him, you bet,
When I put on my Navajo and get
One license to unloose my soul and shout.

Perhaps he thinks I'm old Molasses Freight
Sidetracked at Pokey Pond and filled with prunes
Waiting for Congress to appropriate
The nuggets draped around me in festoons.
Wait till I ticket Pansy, then I guess
Slow Freight will switch to Honeymoon Express!

IX

Today I gave a serenade to Gill;
I says, "To put it pleasant you're a screech,
Your smile would shoo the seagulls off the beach,
Your face would give Vesuvius a chill.
You're just what Mr. Shakespeare calls 'a pill
Trying to keep company with a peach.'
Now, if you want to answer with a speech,
Open your trap at once, or else lie still."

But when I handed Gill the Grip this cluster
He simply clamped his language-mill down tight,
Strangled his guff and acted rather fluster
Although I'm sure I spoke to him polite.
I guess that Mr. Gilly ain't the kind
That understands when people talk refined.

The Love Sonnets of a Car Conductor

X

Three days with sad skidoo have came and went,
Yet Pansy cometh nix to ride with me.
I rubber vainly at the throng to see
Her golden locks—gee! such a discontent!
Perhaps she's beat it with some soapy gent—
Perhaps she's promised Gill the Grip to be
His No. 1 till Death tolls "23!"
While I am Outsky in the supplement.

Now and anon some Lizzie flags the train
And I, poor dots, cry, "Rapture, it is her!"
Yet guess again—my hope is all in vain
And Pansy girl refuses to occur.
If this keeps up I think I'll finish swell
Among the jabbers in a padded cell.

The Love Sonnets of a Car Conductor

XI

My Trolley hikes to Harlem p.d.q.,
And picks up pikers all along the beat.
At six o'clock the aisles are full of feet,
The straps with fingers, and the entire zoo
Boils on the platform with a mad huroo
Reckless as Bronx mosquitoes after meat.
The widow stands, the fat man gets the seat
And Satan smiles like Foxy M. Depew.

And as we hikes along I thinks, thinks I,
"The human race is like the ocean foam,
Roaring and discontented, peevish, fly—"
Say, why in blazes don't they stay to home?
This travel-sickness is a danger which
Keeps hoboes poor and corporations rich.

XII

Today I piped my future Ma-in-law.
She got aboard my Pullman and she scared
Three babies into fits the way she glared.
Rattle my baggage if I ever saw
A cracker-box to equal Mother's jaw,
A hardwood-finish face all nailed and squared.
She ossified the gripman when she stared—
And me? Well, I was overcome with awe.

But, being Pansy's Ma, 't was up to me
To hand her something pit-a-pat and swell,
And so I says, "Hello, Queen Cherokee!
What ho! for Pansy? hope she's feeling well."
And Ma responds, a trifle tart but game,
"She minds her bizness—hope you feel the same."

XIII

I don't think Mother chalked me out to win,
To be the steady of her darling child.
She thinks I am a kick-up, something wild,
And no sweet girl should wear my college pin.
She thinks I'm some too piffly with my chin
And my soft prattle simply gets her riled.
I've lost my keys with her, to put it mild,
I don't belong, because I am not In.

Say how, with such an iceberg on the track,
Can I conduct my car to married bliss?
I hoped that I could whistle Pansy back,
And lo! I got a frostbite off of this!
I'd wrastle Death for Her, I'd fight her Pa,—
But stab me if I'll syrup to her Ma!

The Love Sonnets of a Car Conductor

XIV

E'en as I stood with cobwebs in my tower
A candy vision came and flagged the boat—
Give forty rah–rah–rahs! O joy, O gloat!
'Twas Pansy like a fairy in a bower
Warbling, "Hi, stop the car!" With all my power
I yanked the bell. My brain was all afloat,
My heart cut pin–wheels, stole a base at throat,
Sang "Tammany"—and knighthood was in flower.

I helped her on. My shoes were full of feet.
I says, "How's Ma?" She answers, "Going some."
I doffed my lid and ventured to repeat
The breeze had put the weather on the bum.
Then she replied, not seeming sore or vexed,
"It may not be so punk on Sunday next."

The Love Sonnets of a Car Conductor

XV

The Sinful Rich go whizzing by all day
In wealthy wagons, looking pert and swell;
They get the ride, the Commons get the smell
And full of thought and microbes wend their way.
Maxy the Firebug says that Mammon's sway
Is stringing Virtue to a fare–ye–well,
But wait, he says, till Labor with a yell
Soaks Mam a crack forninst the vertebray.

The Rich, says Max, are simply dips and yeggs
That lift the headlight beads from yaps like us;
They pinch your pie, sew up our ham and eggs
And leave us minus all that they are plus.
The world, says Max, belongs to me and Bill
And Mrs. Casey—whoa! let's roll a pill!

The Love Sonnets of a Car Conductor

XVI

At Mrs. Casey's hunger-killing shop
Whither I hie thrice daily for my stew,
I dream I'm Mr. Waldorf as I chew
My prunes or lay my Boston-baked on top.
Growley and sinkers, slum and mutton sop,
India-rubber jelly known as "glue,"
A soup-bone goulash with a spud or two,
Clatter below until I signal "Stop!"

There may be chefs in France or Albany
Can knock a poem from a wedge of pie;
But just give me a check on Mrs. C.,
For rapid-filling ballast, murmurs I.
Kings may prefer some tasty wads of hash,
But they don't feed at fifteen cents per crash!

The Love Sonnets of a Car Conductor

XVII

Pansy and me for Coney Sunday noon
To see a perfect lady bump the bumps;
We rubbered at the lions with the chumps
And took the Wellman special to the moon.
She asks me, "Dance?" I answers, "Just as soon,"
And so we clutched and whirled into the gumps,
But every time I went to stir my stumps
They stuck like gum-drops to a macaroon.

"I could die dancing, Danny!" murmurs she.
(I gambolled on her corns, she hollered, "Don't!")
"I could die dancing also" (this from me),
"But if you'll pass me up, I guess I won't."
Just then some lemon-sport observed my glide
And warbled, "Slide, you frozen chicken, slide!"

XVIII

I next sprung Pansy for a four-bit feed—
It was a giddy tax, but what care I?
We shot the bill-of-fare from soup to pie
And lemonade (that cost an extra seed).
"You're the cute plunge," says Pans', and I agreed
That at a spenderfest I wasn't shy,—
That when it came to rolling nickels by,
Willie the Cowboy was a perfect bleed.

She said that Thomas Lawson on a lark
Would faint away to see the way I blew;
She said I'd be the whizz in Central Park,
And Ready Cash to me seemed very few.
I asked her, Did she need a Valentine?
And she responded, "You're the pink for mine!"

XIX

We took the iron-clad wave-tub home at ten,
And as we sat conversing on the deck
A certain Hester-street spaghetti-neck
Pipes through the darkness, "Who's yer ladyfren'?"
There might have been a hoe-down there and then
(That war-ship never came so near a wreck);
The dog-eye boy got just as pale as heck
And made a duck behind the trenches, when—

Pansy boiled up and clamped me by a flip.
"Nixie the kindergarten!" murmurs she.
"Gents," I replied out loud, "Get off the ship
And walk, or else nail down that repartee.
This yard of lace I'm holding, so to speak,
Is pinned on tight—or will be in a week."

The Love Sonnets of a Car Conductor

XX

A-logging on a car-barn bench I spied
Gilly the Grip, quite recent this g. m.,
Just like a lily on a broken stem
Or like a Salt Lake buck without a bride.
"Chirk, Gilly, chirk!" I says in tones of pride,
"Perhaps this unhinged heart is just pro tem.
The world is full of pompadours for them
That keep their search-lights peeled from side to side."

But Gill remarked, "Eh, what? Say, I'm so slow
I couldn't catch the hour-hand on a clock.
I'm simply stationary as they grow;.
A lamp-post race could beat me round the block.
You needn't think you're such an Alfred G.,
To motor by a quarry-cart like me!"

The Love Sonnets of a Car Conductor

XXI

Next week the wedding—bells won't do a thing,
For I'll be there, I guess, to fill the set,
And Pansy's Ma, she won't be late, you bet,
To see the Reverend Mr. pull the string.
Me for a spike-tailed scabbard and a ring,
A shell-back shirt, forsooth a peacherette.
I'll be the daintiest bridegroom ever yet;
Nothing to do but take the count, then—bing!

Love in a cottage run on union pay—
Can Teddy Roosevelt do a sum like that?
Two can eat cheap as one, perhaps, but say,
You've got to beat a quarter pretty flat
To cork three squares, make Little Two Shoes snug
And keep the Wolf from chewing up the rug.

XXII

Methinks I'm tagged to join the Worry Club,
To chase the fleeting rhino through the gloom,
To bag the boodle, trap the wild mazume
And scratch for corn when Pansy hollers "Grub!"
They say I'll turn as sickly as a chub
When on the First, with dull and deadly boom,
The Rent comes round and walks into the room,
Remarking, "Peel or else file out, you scrub!"

But when your arms are full of girl and fluff
You hide your nerve behind a yard of grin;
You'd spit into a wild cat's face or bluff
A flock of dragons with a safety pin.
Life's a slow skate, but Love's the dopey gum
That puts a brewery horse in racing trim.

Epilogue

Kind reader, when you 'phone don't ask for me
Enquiring how a Flossie should be won—
There isn't any Rule Book, are you on?
And Queenie can't be coaxed by recipee.
Some girls like hard-luck music, minor key,
Some like the Gas-car Gussie act, hot ton,
Others are simply fierce for Jolly John
Who loves to make a noise like repartee.

None but the Nerve, say I, deserves the Fair,
And stony hearts can't stand up long to chin.
If Willie-on-the-doormat lingers there
The chances are he'll be Invited In.
Up against Love the Candy Kid is nix;
The Porous Plaster wins because it sticks