JEFFERSON
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Book Notes #141

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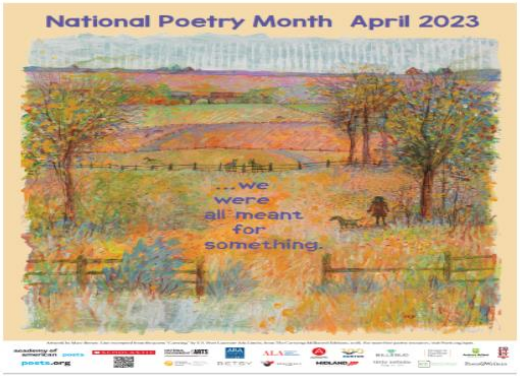
High School Poetry
(Part One)



Introduced in 1996 by the Academy of American Poets, April is National Poetry Month. According to the Academy, National Poetry Month's goals are to:

- "highlight the extraordinary legacy and ongoing achievement of American poets
- encourage the reading of poems

- assist teachers in bringing poetry into their classrooms
- increase the attention paid to poetry by national and local media
- encourage increased publication and distribution of poetry books, and
- encourage support for poets and poetry." [1]

Vanilla enough, hardly controversial, but somehow it rankles. Although my reaction is not nearly as strong as acclaimed poet Charles Bernstein's, who thinks the month should be abolished [2], there seems to be something anodyne about an "official" month celebrating *poetry*. Bernstein certainly and perhaps myself still see poets through a romantic lens as Shelley's "unacknowledged legislators of the world," who, seeing things others don't, correct our errors, set new standards, and put the world right.

Which, of course, to their eternal frustration, they don't.

Still, it's a cultural plus that there are organizations that take poetry seriously, support its practice, and encourage folks to write and to read poetry. Speaking of the latter, another service the Academy of American Poets provides is its *Poem-a-Day*. It's free and it brings "write" (pun intentional) into your email inbox every morning a poem by both some fine global and American contemporary poets and by some – *classic* isn't quite the right word – poets both famous and obscure, both ancient and modern. The poem for today (Sunday April 16, 2023) is from the "Khamriyyah" by Ibn al-Farid. Ibn al-Farid is a 13th century Arab Sufi poet some of whose poems "are considered among the greatest mystic poems in Islamic literature." [3] Translated from the Arabic by Leonard Chalmers-Hunt, today's excerpt says:

from the Khamriyyah

xxvi
When questioned oft by folk incredulous,
My answers they've rebuked as nebulous.
"Tell us," said they, "the secrets of a wine
Which warms the heart, and makes the eye to shine!" [4]

Or, perhaps a *Poem-a-Day* that ***Book Notes*** readers might find more resonant is Dorianne Laux's April 4, 2023 offering "I Dare You":

from I Dare You

It's autumn, and we're getting rid
of books, getting ready to retire,
to move some place smaller, more

manageable. We're living in reverse,
age-proofing the new house, nothing
on the floors to trip over, no hindrances
to the slowed mechanisms of our bodies,
a small table for two. Our world is
shrinking, our closets mostly empty,
gone the tight skirts and dancing shoes,
the bells and whistles… [5]

You can sign up for the Academy of American Poets *Poem-a-Day* at Poem-a-Day | Academy of American Poets.

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As I said last week, National Poetry Month got me thinking about the poetry I read in high school and a book series I founded in Cleveland some years ago. That series' theme was "reflections on the experience of high school classics after a lifetime of experience." As the second photo above illustrates, when talking about high school classics one is almost always talking about novels or short stories. In that series, our experience was similar. We primarily examined novels, although Chaucer's ***The Canterbury Tales*** was obviously poetic in form, as was the language in Shakespeare's ***Julius Caesar***. But we did not revisit any – struggling for a descriptor here – any lyric or short-form poetry.

Which omission then got me thinking about what poetry I actually read in high school. And, except for some vague memory of Carl Sandburg's "Chicago," which begins:

from Chicago

Hog Butcher for the World,
Tool Maker, Stacker of Wheat,
Player with Railroads and the Nation's Freight Handler;
Stormy, husky, brawling,
City of the Big Shoulders… [6]

I couldn't really recall any poems from high school English class.

Go figure, because later in college I double-majored in English and history, which ***Book Notes*** readers will immediately recognize as the recurring themes of numerous ***Notes***. In fact, upon reflection, the only book of poetry I recall from my high school years I happen to still own. It's tattered now, more than a half-century later, but Lawrence Ferlinghetti's ***Coney Island of the Mind*** taught me that there was more to poetry than my English teachers apparently

imagined. Or at least in the insular late-1950s and very early-1960s on the edge of the midwestern prairie were willing to share with their students. It's hard to imagine either the stylish Miss Kirk, locus of many a Canton McKinley High School teenage boy's reveries, or Mr. Ober-something, whose name I can't remember, but who seemed to have been born old, curling up with Ferlinghetti.

But, then again, I've been wrong before.

(***Quick aside:*** I'm self-aware enough to know – what's the cliché: 'what goes round comes round? – that some of my own students might have thought me a bit doddering. On more than one occasion I had to explain a cultural reference that to me seemed self-evident, but about which they had never heard.)

I wrote about Ferlinghetti in ***Book Note*** #50 "Ferlinghetti: Poet, Activist, Cultural Icon" which can be found here.

Ferlinghetti says it was in "The pennycandystore beyond the El" where he first "fell in love with unreality" – an artist's sensitivity to the "is" beyond the "seems" which is all of the real most people ever see. It's the artist's calling to help us "see,," as in another Ferlinghetti poem that taught me not to "overthink" – a habit I continually need to unlearn. All we really need to do is to pay attention – to be more ***present-to-the-present***.

#16

Kafka's Castle stands above the world
like a last bastille
of the Mystery of Existence
its blind approaches baffle us
steep paths
plunge nowhere from it
roads radiate into air
like the labyrinth wires
of a telephone central
thru which all calls are
infinitely untraceable
up there
it is heavenly weather
souls dance undressed
together
and like loiterers
on the fringes of a fair
we ogle the unobtainable
imagined mystery

yet away around on the far side
like the stage door of a circus tent
is a wide vent in the battlements
where even elephants
waltz thru [7]

***

Puzzled, as I said, by my not remembering much, if any, poetry from high school, I wondered what others recalled. So, I sent out a request to some ***Book Notes*** readers about what poems – both those they loved and those they loathed – that they remembered from high school days. First, let me thank those who responded – much appreciated!

Responses ranged from "I don't remember any" to a number of very thoughtful replies about how a poem changed their understanding of themselves. Sorting out the responses, they fell into several buckets: 1) fragments of famous poems; 2) entire poems; 3) poems that told stories; 4) poems they hated; 5) song lyrics (with one respondent wondering if song lyrics qualified as a poem); 6) poems that helped them realize that poetry could be serious and deal with topics other than the merely sentimental; and, 7) poems that gave them new insights into themselves.

Among those who recalled fragments of a poem, Carl Sandburg and Robert Frost made multiple appearances. Like me, reader "Roy" recalled Sandburg's "Chicago" quoted above and "Fog," which in its entirety recites:

<u>Fog</u>

The fog comes
on little cat feet.

It sits looking
over harbor and city
on silent haunches
and then moves on. [8]

Others recalled reading multiple poems by Robert Frost but could only identify one precisely. "The Road Not Taken" is arguably the most famous poem in the English language. It is quoted and cited more often than virtually any other artifact; for a particularly insightful analysis of both the poem's and Frost's fame see David Orr's 2015 article in ***The Paris Review***. [9] And, as Orr points out, it is almost always misunderstood. Most readers, and certainly those quoting its most famous lines from coffee mugs, T-shirts, and internet memes, read the

poem as a celebration of individualism – as a celebration of having the courage to be, in the parlance of pop culture, of having the courage to be *me*, of having the courage to do it *"my way."*

When it is actually a very subtle self-analysis of how we alter our stories of *self* to our own advantage, a realization that Frost's last lines wryly suggest. Compare, for instance, the second and fourth stanzas – the roads were really pretty much the same, they were pretty much equally "fair," and the speaker takes the one less traveled by because – well, not because it promised adventure but because both were equally worn and he thought he'd try this one today and the other another day.

Yet, at the end, the poet imagines himself sometime in the future telling of his choice as if it were an existential decision that "made all the difference." It's a great poem not because Frost was some incipient forerunner of the late 20th century's "I gotta be me" ethos, but because he was keenly aware of how we cloak ourselves to our own best advantage. In his art, if not in his personal life, Frost was always ruthlessly honest with himself.

You just have to pay attention.

At this point we could have a fascinating discussion about authorial intention and how it is largely irrelevant. Which is to say, what the author meant to say takes a back seat to what readers say it means, for all art – music, painting, film, literature – is really a co-creation of the artist and the auditor; in poetry's case, a co-creation between the poet and the reader. Now, some will say "what about the plain meaning of the words," while others will retort "that poetry is by definition – as is all language – metaphorical" hinting at its "meaning" by allusive comparison.

Is your head beginning to hurt?

Speaking of 'roads not taken,' exploring the nexus of artist and viewer, poet and reader, is a speculative labyrinth from which we might never return. So, we'll take a hint from Frost and leave it for another day.

<u>The Road Not Taken</u>

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;
Then took the other, as just as fair,

And having perhaps the better claim
Because it was grassy and wanted wear,
Though as for that the passing there
Had worn them really about the same,
And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black.
Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way
I doubted if I should ever come back.
I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I,
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference. [10]

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Several readers remembered entire poems, including a number that are personal favorites of mine. Reader “Eileen” noted Tennyson’s “Ulysses” and Shelley’s “Ozymandias," which is an interesting pairing. One of the great celebrations in the western canon of humanity’s heroic spirit, “Ulysses” restless resoluteness is both humanity’s blessing and curse. Blessing, because in seeking newer worlds, both literally and figuratively, humans have inestimably improved their “lot” – in fancy language, the human condition; curse, because in doing so they have also spread who knows what seas of pain and fallen victim themselves to a perpetual “restlessness” seeking adventure. It is humanity’s curse that it can find no peace. Pascal said something to the effect that most human misery results from humans’ inability to sit in a room quietly alone.

“Ozymandias” reminds them and their heroes that fame is fleeting.

On a more mundane level, “Ulysses” tells us, in a manner of speaking, that retirement is overrated. I’m hardly one to tell him he’s wrong, for as Ben Speggen, Jefferson Society Vice President will tell you, I have flunked retirement numerous times.

In fact, I’m flunking it right now.

Having defeated the Trojans by the trick of his “trojan horse” and survived his 20-year odyssey returning from Troy, during which he slew the cyclops, survived Circe’s enticements, navigated between Charybdis and Scylla (literally ‘a rock and a hard place’), and returned to Ithaca where he slew the suitors bedeviling his beloved and ever-faithful wife Penelope, and installed his son Telemachus as king, Ulysses is bored.

Rather, as the 21st century cliché goes, than “rusting out,," the restless Ulysses decides to seek a newer world and sail to the western sea where the sun sets, for as he says:

from Ulysses

...I cannot rest from travel; I will drink
Life to the lees...Come, my friends,
‘Tis not too late to seek a newer world...
... and though
We are not now that strength which in the old days
Moved earth and heaven, that which we are, we are,
One equal temper of heroic hearts,
Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will
To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield. [11]

Ulysses was not a tyrant, but Shelley would remind him that the only reason anyone still remembers him is because Homer and Tennyson (not to mention dozens and dozens of lesser artists) wrote about him, for it is the fate of conquerors to see their conquests turned to dust.

Ozymandias

I met a traveller from an antique land
Who said: “Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the desert . . . Near them, on the sand,
Half sunk, a shattered visage lies, whose frown,
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,
The hand that mocked them, and the heart that fed:
And on the pedestal these words appear:
‘My name is Ozymandias, king of kings:
Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!’
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch far away.” [12]

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Having just mentioned Tennyson, reader “Tom No. 1," I received responses from several “Toms," recollection of high school poetry was of being tortured by Tennyson’s “The Charge of the Light-Brigade.." Apparently, his father was a

poetry aficionado. He had his son, our “Tom,," memorize “The Charge of the Light-Brigade” and recite it at the dinner table! It’s a long poem; it celebrates the sacrifice of the 600 members of the Light-Brigade who died in a futile charge during the Crimean War. Two observations: 1) although the British were part of the victorious alliance that defeated Russia, the ineptness of their miliary leadership in providing logistical and medical support for their troops led to demands for reform and the professionalization of the practice of medicine; and, 2) the great hero, in this case heroine, of the war effort was not the martyred Light-Brigade, but Florence Nightingale who pioneered modern nursing as she treated the wounded. It’s a long poem, but here are its key stanzas.

from The Charge of the Light-Brigade

I
Half a league, half a league,
Half a league onward,
All in the valley of Death
  Rode the six hundred.
“Forward, the Light Brigade!
Charge for the guns!” he said.
Into the valley of Death
  Rode the six hundred

III
Cannon to right of them,
Cannon to left of them,
Cannon in front of them
  Volleyed and thundered;
Stormed at with shot and shell,
Boldly they rode and well,
Into the jaws of Death,
Into the mouth of hell
  Rode the six hundred. [13]

***

Other readers recalled poems that told stories – in literary terms, narrative poems. Three got multiple mentions. “Wally” particularly enjoyed Alfred Noyes’ “The Highwayman” and its tale of romantic sacrifice as the innkeeper’s daughter Bess kills herself to warn her lover – the mysterious, unnamed “Highwayman” – of the trap laid by her captors – the Red Coats. Noyes was a “popular” poet who wrote to earn a living by telling memorable tales. He made no pretense of great philosophy or insight, but he could tell a tale in memorable, quasi-mythic language. Here is the coda to “The Highwayman” in which Noyes invokes the

mythic love of Bess the Innkeeper's daughter for her "highwayman" who himself dies trying to avenge her.

from The Highwayman

Coda

And still of a winter's night, they say, when the wind is in the trees,
When the moon is a ghostly galleon tossed upon cloudy seas,
When the road is a ribbon of moonlight over the purple moor,
A highwayman comes riding—
Riding—riding—
A highwayman comes riding, up to the old inn-door.

Over the cobbles he clatters and clangs in the dark inn-yard.
He taps with his whip on the shutters, but all is locked and barred.
He whistles a tune to the window, and who should be waiting there
But the landlord's black-eyed daughter,
Bess, the landlord's daughter,
Plaiting a dark red love-knot into her long black hair. [14]

***

Perhaps not as egregiously as "Tom No. 1," but several readers recalled being tormented trying to decipher Geoffrey Chaucer's Middle English in ***The Canterbury Tales***. I have no memory of reading ***The Canterbury Tales*** in high school; if we did, it almost certainly would have been in a modern translation. I do recall in college being captivated by Chaucer's language and discovering that the Middle English, if one simply listened to it a bit not only made sense but had a rich musicality.

Still, what readers tell me they remember – they must have read it in translation – is Chaucer's earthiness and not so subtle sexuality. Not surprisingly, then, the two tales they most recalled were "The Miller's Tale" and "The Wife of Bath's Tale." In "The Miller's Tale" a would-be lover inadvertently kisses – literally – the "arse" of his intended *inamorata* Alisoun while her other lover Nicholas is diverted and her husband John is sleeping in the attic for fear that a second Noah's flood is ensuing. It's a very early version of what would later be called "slapstick" comedy and is actually, once you get into its rhythm (no pun intended), quite funny.

"The Wife of Bath's Tale," or more accurately her "Prologue" and numerous asides within the tale she tells is the first appearance in English literature of what one might call a feminist sensibility. Alyson has been married multiple

times and has a strong preference for younger men. She is a successful businesswoman of independent means who has no intention of submitting herself to a man's authority. She is unapologetically interested in men and sex, and, most importantly, she is a stout defender of women's rights before there was such a concept. Critics to this day argue whether Chaucer was mocking women who step out of their subservient role or celebrating a "new woman" who dared to be independent. Such women did exist in Chaucer's times; they were almost always widows of means; and their independence threatened the existing social order.

All of which I am certain escaped the notice of teenagers laboring over Chaucer's Middle English during high school English class, but I am sure they got the gist of Alisoun's defense of her many marriages, when she says:

from The Wife of Bath's Prologue

'What do I care if people choose to see
Scandal in Lamech for his bigamy?
I know that Abraham was a holy man
And Jacob too – I speak as best I can –
Yet each of them, as we know, had several brides,
Like many another holy man besides.
Show me a time or text where God disparages
Or sets a prohibition upon marriages
Expressly, let me have it! Show it me!
And where did he command virginity?
I know as well as you do, never doubt it,
All the Apostle Paul has said about it;
He said that as for precepts he had none.
One may advise a woman to be one;
Advice is no commandment in my view... [15]

That is one of her tamer, less salacious defenses of marriage and female sexuality in-and-out-of marriage. When we read "The Wife of Bath's Tale" in that Cleveland-based reading group I mentioned earlier, Alisoun quickly emerged as a favorite among the women members, if a bit startling, and a puzzle to the men. I think Chaucer would have found that to be just about right.

Several readers remember memorizing sections of Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" – a long narrative poem that tells the story of an ancient mariner seeking to expiate his guilt at having shot an albatross that brought him, and his shipmates, good fortune. It has been interpreted numerous ways – a story of becoming, a story of expiation, and a story about how growth only occurs when one has stepped outside of one's own limited experience, but

such a step requires courage and comes with no guarantee of success. Most did not recall much of the poem's story or its many levels of meaning, but they could still recite its most famous refrain:

from The Rime of the Ancient Mariner

Water, water, everywhere,
And all the boards did shrink;
Water, water, everywhere,
Nor any drop to drink. [16]

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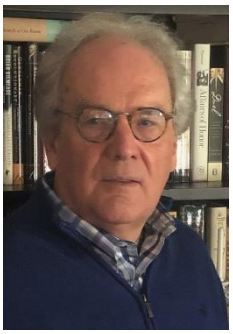
This ***Book Note*** has gotten longer than I intended, although in my defense I must point out that many of the words aren't mine. We'll continue this exploration of readers' recollections of high school poetry next week, when, among other topics, we'll answer "Ned's" question "Do song lyrics count as poems?"

If you haven't emailed me a response, let me know your recollection of your high school experience of poetry and what you think about it after a lifetime of experience. You can reach me at roth@jeserie.org.



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"20 Indispensable High School Reads" at **Edutopia.org George Lucas Educational Foundation** available at 20 Indispensable High School Reads | Edutopia accessed April 16, 2023.

End Notes

1. *"National Poetry Month FAQ"* at **Academy of American Poets** available at National Poetry Month FAQ | Academy of American Poets accessed April 10, 2023.
2. See *"Against National Poetry Month As Such"* in **Chicago, The University of Chicago Press** available at Bernstein, Against National Poetry Month As Such (uchicago.edu) accessed April 10, 2023.
3. *"Ibn al-Farid,"* at **Academy of American Poets** available at About Ibn al-Fārid | Academy of American Poets accessed April 16, 2023.
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5. Laux, Dorianne, *"I Dare You"* at **Academy of American Poets** available at I Dare You by Dorianne Laux - Poems | Academy of American Poets accessed April 16, 2023.
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7. Ferlinghetti, Lawrence. *"#16"* in **A Coney Island of the Mind** (New York: A New Directions Book, 1958), p. 31.
8. Sandburg, Carl. *"Fog"* at **The Poetry Foundation** available at Fog by Carl Sandburg | Poetry Foundation accessed April 17, 2023.
9. Orr, David. *"The Most Misread Poem in America,"* **The Paris Review** (September 11. 2015) available at https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2015/09/11/the-most-misread-poem-in-america/ accessed April 17, 2023.
10. Frost, Robert. *"The Road Not Taken,"* in **The Poetry of Robert Frost**, Ed. Edward Connery Lathem. (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1979), p. 105.
11. Tennyson, Alfred, Lord, *"Ulysses"* in **The Norton Anthology of Poetry,** Eds. Arthur M. Eastman, et. al. (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1970), pp. 737-738/
12. Shelley, Percy Bysshe. *"Ozymandias"* in **The Norton Anthology of Poetry,** Eds. Arthur M. Eastman, et. al. (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1970), p. 654.
13. Tennyson, Alfred, Lord. *"The Charge of the Light-Brigade"* at **Academy of American Poets** available at The Charge of the Light Brigade by Alfred, Lord Tennyson - Poems | poets.org accessed April 17, 2023.
14. Noyes, Alfred. *"The Highwayman"* at **Academy of American Poets** available at The Highwayman by Alfred Noyes - Poems | Academy of American Poets accessed April 17, 2023.
15. Chaucer, Geoffrey, *"The Wife of Bath's Proglogue"* in **The Canterbury Tales**, Tr. Neville Coghill. (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), p. 260.
16. Coleridge, Samuel Taylor. *"The Rime of the Ancient Mariner,"* in **The Norton Anthology of Poetry,** Eds. Arthur M. Eastman, et. al. (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1970), p. 600.

In Case You Missed It

The Wider World | Israel: Constant Clash of Interests written by President of DC Analytics **Diane Chido**

Truth in Love | Bridging the Diversity Gap written by Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence **Dr. Parris J. Baker**

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