

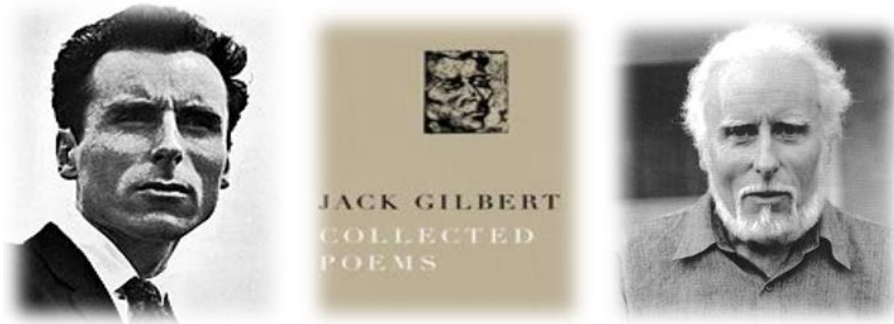
# JEFFERSON EDUCATIONAL SOCIETY

## Book Notes #168

February 2024

By Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence  
Dr. Andrew Roth

### Jack Gilbert



Jack Gilbert. *Collected Poems*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012

Who is Jack Gilbert?

What can you learn from him?

These past several days a number of readers commented to me that they enjoyed last week's **Book Note** of "notes." They especially enjoyed the last "note" extolling the study of the visual arts, music, and the humanities (primarily

literature, history, and philosophy) as the keys to any education claiming to be “higher.” Which, of course, is only “higher” if it helps students learn how to *see*, if it helps students learn how to be ***present-to-the-present***.

In particular, they enjoyed Jack Gilbert’s poem “Highlights and Interstices” drawing their attention to the fact that most of one’s life occurs when one is not paying attention. So, as one reader asked me, “Is the purpose of an education then to help students learn how to pay attention?”

The answer to which is “Yes.”

Pay attention to what? To life, in all its ugliness and beauty, in all its sorrow and joy. The arts and humanities awaken us to the welter of life swirling all around us.

Jack Gilbert spent his entire life *attending* “to life, in all its ugliness and beauty, in all its sorrow and joy,” for as Elizabeth Gilbert (no relation) said, “...a fundamental feature of Jack Gilbert (is) a commitment to paying attention, to not wanting to miss it, not wanting to turn an eye from it.” [1] She made that comment in an essay in which she “reads” Gilbert’s poem “A Brief for the Defense” as the defining poem of Gilbert’s lifelong determination to see life as it is in all “its sorrow and joy” and emerge embracing joy and celebrating that one got to live at all. As Gilbert says:

*from A Brief for the Defense*

We must risk delight. We can do without pleasure,  
but not delight. Not enjoyment. We must have  
the stubbornness to accept our gladness in the ruthless  
furnace of this world. [2]

As Nasrullah Mambrol said in an “Analysis of Jack Gilbert’s Poems,” Gilbert’s final message is one of joy in being alive.” [3]

In addition to last week, we’ve encountered Jack Gilbert before in a number of ***Book Notes***. As long ago as ***Book Note #3***, which ran on April 2, 2020, I’ve been bringing Gilbert to your attention. Spurred by that reader interest in Gilbert from last week’s ***Note***, I thought we’d revisit that third ***Book Note***, but not as a “***Classic***.” Instead, I am going to take the liberty to quote and edit myself, and then conclude with Gilbert’s celebration of life by revisiting the Icarus myth. Unlike W. H. Auden in the “*Musee Beaux des Artes*,” Gilbert, no wimpy optimist – hardly! – has a more positive “take” on the Icarian (to coin a word) experience.

**Aside:** Since I am quoting myself, beginning here, I am taking from that earlier *Note*, making comments and observations in *italics* but not putting quotation marks around the earlier material to avoid cluttering the page with a forest of “” “” “” marks. You can find the original **Book Note #3** [here](#).

In that earlier “Note,” I noted that Albert Camus in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, perhaps riffing on Shakespeare’s “To be, or not to be, that is the question,” stated, “There is but one truly philosophical problem and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy. All the rest ... comes afterwards.” [4]

Having chosen life, in a poem I included in **Book Note #167**, Gilbert then draws our attention to the fact that not paying as close attention as we might, we then miss most of it:

#### Highlights and Interstices

We think of lifetimes as mostly the exceptional and sorrows. Marriage we remember as the children, vacations, and emergencies. The uncommon parts. But the best is often when nothing is happening. The way a mother picks up the child almost without noticing and carries her across Waller Street while talking with the other woman. What if she could keep all of that? Our lives happen between the memorable. I have lost two thousand habitual breakfasts with Michiko. What I miss most about her is that commonplace I can no longer remember. [5]

Michiko was the sculptor Michiko Nogami, Gilbert’s wife of 11 years who died at 36 of cancer in 1982. Much of Gilbert’s poetry deals with his relationships with women, in particular his wives, the poet Linda Gregg and Nogami. As Megan O’Rourke said in a 2005 article at **slate.com**, “*The Recluse: Rescuing the poet Jack Gilbert from Oblivion*,” “Gilbert doesn’t help his cause with his decidedly old-fashioned obsession with women. ... But I find Gilbert’s obsession with women not only tolerable but compelling partly because it’s more self-conscious ... rescuing from the debilitating forces of cynicism a conviction that transcendence can await us in this world.” [6] *In our hyper-politically correct times, Gilbert’s relationships with women can be problematic. I find reassurance in my estimation of Gilbert that many of his most compelling champions, like Elizabeth Gilbert, are women! For Gilbert’s real topic is life and the triumph over its sorrows one attains by paying it the closest attention.*

Gilbert was born in 1925 in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, where he attended Peabody High School. Although he did not graduate from high school, he managed to gain admission to the University of Pittsburgh, from which he graduated in 1954. While at Pitt, he became seriously interested in writing and poetry. After a time in Europe, Gilbert landed in San Francisco during the 1950s and early 1960s earning a master's degree in English at San Francisco State University and becoming deeply involved with San Francisco's "Beat Generation." As John Penner noted in his *Los Angeles Times* obituary of Gilbert, "He rebelled, not only against the Beats, but against their avant garde language experiments and other endeavors that were in vogue at the time." [7] As David Haglund remarked "Many of his poems have a straightforward lyricism that grabs you right away." [8] Or, as O'Rourke noted, "He's a poet whose directness and lucidity ought to appeal to lots of readers – the same readers who can't abide the inward-gazing obscurity of much of contemporary poetry." [9]

It has been suggested that Gilbert's greatest work of art was his own life – he was single-minded in the pursuit of his art. As Sarah Fay said in *The Paris Review*, Gilbert "lived utterly without regard for the conventions of literary fortune and fame." [10] Or, as Linda Gregg, who shared his Greek exile, remarked "All Jack ever wanted to know was that he was awake – that the trees in bloom were almond trees – and to walk down the road to get breakfast. ... He never cared if he was poor or had to sleep on a park bench." [11]

When his first book of poems, *Views of Jeopardy*, won the Yale Series of Younger Poets award in 1962 and fame came calling, Gilbert decamped to Europe for the next 30 years where he lived a sparse existence in Paris, Italy, Greece, and the Netherlands honing his craft and sharpening his vision. In a clear and lucid voice, Gilbert brings us into his world and, bringing us into his world, opens us to the *real* making us **present-to-the-present**. As in:

*from The Forgotten Dialect of the Heart*

How astonishing it is that language can almost mean,  
and frightening that it does not quite. *Love*, we say,  
*God*, we say, *Rome* and *Michiko*, we write, and the words  
get it wrong...

... Maybe the Etruscan texts would  
finally explain why the couples on their tombs  
are smiling. And maybe not. When the thousands  
of mysterious Sumerian tablets were translated,  
they seemed to be business records. But what if they  
are poems or psalms? [12]

Or:

Pavane

I thought it said on the girl's red purse  
A kind of sad dance and all day  
wondered what was being defined.  
Wisdom? The history of Poland?  
All the ways of growing old?  
No, I decided (walking back  
to the hotel this morning), it must be love.  
The real love that follows  
early delight and ignorance.  
A wonderful sad dance that comes after. [13]

Or:

from Less Being More

It started when he was a young man  
and went to Italy. He climbed mountains,  
wanting to be a poet. But was troubled  
by what Dorothy Wordsworth wrote in  
her journal about William having worn  
himself out searching all day to find  
a simile for nightingale. It seemed  
a long way from the tug of passion. [14]

Or:

from The Lost Hotels of Paris

... But it's the having  
not the keeping that is the treasure.  
Ginsberg came to my house one afternoon  
and said he was giving up poetry  
because it told lies, that language distorts.  
I agreed, but asked what we have  
that gets it right even that much.  
We look up at the stars and they are  
not there. We see the memory  
of when they were, once upon a time.  
And that too is more than enough. [15]

Or: (particularly apt in this time of virus, images of death everywhere on the  
Nightly News, this meditation on grief – *it seemed apt four years ago in what*

*we thought might be a time of plague, but it is still apt in 2024 as we contemplate the bizarre spectacle of Americans turning on one another while some mourn what they fear is the death of democracy and others celebrate – it's hard to say what...)*

### Michiko Dead

He manages like somebody carrying a box that is too heavy, first with his arms underneath. When their strength gives out, he moves the hands forward, hooking them on the corners, pulling the weight against his chest. He moves his thumbs slightly when the fingers begin to tire, and it makes different muscles take over. Afterward, he carries it on his shoulder, until the blood drains out of the arm that is stretched up to steady the box and the arm goes numb. But now the man can hold underneath again, so that he can go on without ever putting the box down. [16]

Or (for any aging Boomer recalling their yellow-back radio or first transistor, any Gen Xer, Y, or Millennial recalling their cassette deck, iPod or MP3 – substitute the song titles of your time and choice – *still true, every one of every generation if they are fortunate enough to live to old age gets to enjoy nostalgic pangs as they recall their gone youth, but Gilbert, I think, means you to enjoy the pang for, after all, you got to be old – not much, but it's something*):

### The Lost World

Think what it was like, he said, Peggy Lee and Goodman all the time. Carl Ravazza making me crazy with “Vieni Su” from a ballroom in New Jersey every night, the radio filling my dark room in Pittsburgh with naked-shouldered women in black gowns. Helen Forrest and Helen O’Connell, and later the young Sarah Vaughn out of Chicago from midnight until two. Think of being fifteen in the middle of leafy June when Sinatra and Ray Eberle both had number one records of “Fools Rush In.” Somebody singing “Tenderly” and somebody doing “This Love of Mine.” Helplessly adolescent while the sound of romance was constantly everywhere. All day long out of windows along the street.

Sinatra with “Close to You.” And all the bands. Artie Shaw with “Green Eyes” and whoever was always playing “Begin the Beguine.” Me desperate because I wouldn’t get there in time. Who can blame me for my heart? What choice did I have? Harry James with “Sleepy Lagoon.” Imagine, on a summer night, “Sleepy Lagoon”! [17]

A video of Jack Gilbert reading several of his poems can be found [here](#).

This ends my cribbing from myself and that earlier **Book Note #3**. Several paragraphs back before revisiting that four-year-old **Book Note**, I said that Gilbert, who for all of life’s sorrow never forgot the joy, had a much more positive take on the fall of Icarus than did Auden. He relates it to his failed marriage to Linda Gregg, which he did not see as a failure. They tried; it didn’t work. But having tried together, they had that. Apparently, it was enough, for they remained lifelong friends. Gregg dedicated her collected poems to Gilbert shortly before she died. He dedicated his to her and Michiko.

Gilbert saw in Icarus what I saw – that it was not the fall that was important. It was the trying. That Icarus sought to fly to the sun and failed is not the point. It’s that Icarus tried, for in the trying is triumph.

Gilbert said it better:

### Failing and Flying

Everyone forgets that Icarus also flew.  
It’s the same when love comes to an end,  
or the marriage fails and people say  
they knew it was a mistake, that everybody  
said it would never work. That she was  
old enough to know better. But anything  
worth doing is worth doing badly.  
Like being there by that summer ocean  
on the other side of the island while  
love was fading out of her, the stars  
burning so extravagantly those nights that  
anyone could tell you they would never last.  
Every morning she was asleep in my bed  
like a visitation, the gentleness in her  
like antelope standing in the dawn mist.  
Each afternoon I watched her coming back  
through the hot stony field after swimming,  
the sea light behind her and the huge sky

on the other side of that. Listened to her while we ate lunch. How can they say the marriage failed? Like the people who came back from Provence (when it was Provence) and said it was pretty but the food was greasy. I believe Icarus was not failing as he fell, but just coming to the end of his triumph. [18]

You might be tempted to think this is all elegantly phrased, yet maudlin. Isn't it a Hallmark moment to say that life is sorrow, but we should take delight in its moments of joy?

Jack Gilbert didn't sugarcoat anything. Read the entire "A Brief for the Defense," which can be found [here](#).

My question to you is: If that's what you think, "What other choice do we have?" My wife Judy and I are ***This Old House*** fans. This year's program is about a family in Lexington, Massachusetts remodeling their home to maximize accessibility for their young son who suffers from a debilitating form of muscular dystrophy. It will gradually render him less and less mobile ending in a slow-motion death. I can't even begin to comprehend the parents' pain. Yet, when asked why they were doing what they're doing, the mother gave a Gilbertian answer – "What other choice did they have?" They know what is happening, but they refuse to lie down and weep. They are determined that if this is the life their son and they have, then while they have the time, they will maximize their joy.

That's courage.

*That's paying attention.*

If being ***present-to-the-present*** means anything at all, it's that family in Massachusetts and all who suffer yet find the ray of sun in the shadows.



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### End Notes

1. Gilbert, Elizabeth, quoted in Joe Fassler’s “*The ‘Stubborn Gladness’ of Elizabeth Gilbert’s Favorite Poet*,” in **The Atlantic** (November 6, 2013) available at <The 'Stubborn Gladness' of Elizabeth Gilbert's Favorite Poet - The Atlantic> accessed February 11, 2024.
2. Gilbert, Jack, “*A Brief for the Defense*” in **The Collected Poems** (New York: Knopf, 2017), p. 213.
3. Mambrol, Nasrullah, “*Analysis of Jack Gilbert’s Poems*” in **Literary Theory and Analysis** (July 14, 2020) available at [Analysis of Jack Gilbert’s Poems – Literary Theory and Criticism \(literariness.org\)](Analysis of Jack Gilbert's Poems – Literary Theory and Criticism (literariness.org)) accessed February 11, 2024.
4. Camus, Albert. ***The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays***, p. 4 found <here accessed on Sunday March 29, 2020>.
5. [Gilbert, Jack, \*\*The Collected Poems\*\*, cited above, p. 176.](Gilbert, Jack, The Collected Poems, cited above, p. 176)
6. O’Rourke, Meghan, “The Recluse: Rescuing the poet Jack Gilbert from oblivion” in **Slate Magazine** (May 9, 2005) found <here accessed on Sunday March 29, 2020>.
7. Penner, John, “Jack Gilbert dies at 87; unconventional poet knew fame and obscurity,” **Los Angeles Times** (November 14, 2012) found <here> accessed on Sunday March 29, 2020.
8. Haglund, David, “*Jack Gilbert, American Poet, Dies at 87*” in **Slate Magazine** (November 13, 2012) found <here> accessed on Sunday March 29, 2020.
9. Meghan O’Rourke, **cited above**.
10. Sarah Fay, “*Jack Gilbert, The Art of Poetry No. 91*” in **The Paris Review** (Fall/Winter 2005) available at [Paris Review - The Art of Poetry No. 91 \(theparisreview.org\)](Paris Review - The Art of Poetry No. 91 (theparisreview.org)) accessed February 11, 2024.
11. Ibid.
12. Gilbert, Jack, **The Collected Poems**, cited above, p. 125.
13. Ibid., p. 99.
14. Ibid., p. 249
15. Ibid., p. 263.
16. Ibid., p. 181.
17. Ibid., p. 291.
18. Ibid., p. 228.

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