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# *Book Notes*

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## *Readers' Favorite Poems (Part Three)*


Whether they write in agreement or to point out my errors, I enjoy hearing from ***Book Notes*** readers. As expected, the ***Notes*** that brush up against the political generate the most pointed responses. Interestingly enough, they frequently contradict one another. Recently, a reader accused me of being both an advocate and apologist for the "woke left" and, in so many words, another reader said I was a retrograde old white guy who needed to "wake up." The contradiction actually reassures me, for, since I am an espouser of what the Niskanen Center calls "heroic centrism," it suggests I am getting things more right than wrong.

Historically oriented ***Notes*** also receive a fair share of feedback as readers want to argue the finer points of historiography, which I thought an esoteric topic, but, then, Jeffersonians are a knowledgeable lot.

For a variety of reasons and, admittedly, somewhat surprisingly, far more interesting to me has been the response to the ***Notes*** on poetry. First, I say "surprisingly" because the poetry ***Notes*** have yielded more responses than any other ***Book Notes*** topic. And although I have not done the arithmetic, I think the

poetry ***Notes*** have produced more responses than all the other ***Book Notes*** combined. Now, admittedly, I asked readers to send me their favorite poem and many did; still, controlling for that, poetry prompts a lot of reader attention. That reader attention ranges from the very sophisticated to the whimsical to several readers thanking me for igniting (reigniting?) their interest in poetry.

Speaking of "interest in poetry," for a good portion of the latter 20th century the conventional wisdom claimed that poetry was a dead art, that it was passe. Although in traditional book shops it received minimal shelf space, I never accepted that argument. Granted, it was not a mass culture, pop art, but that also might be a misperception, for what are rock lyrics and rap if not poetry? Richard Thomas, George Martin Lane Professor of Classics at Harvard, offers a freshman seminar on the art of Bob Dylan. It is "FRSEM 37u: Bob Dylan." [2]

Rather than a "dead art," poetry is not only alive and well, but also it is thriving. A number of observers maintain that the last 50 to 75 years or so are the Golden Age of American poetry. There is a vibrant small press industry publishing chapbooks and other slender volumes. The internet is awash in poetry; much of it unreadably self-centered; a great deal academic in the worst sense of the word.

But, more than a bit is exceptionally fine. For a taste of some of the best in contemporary American poetry, you might want to check out ***The Best American Poetry 2020***. ***The Best American Poetry*** is an anthology series that since 1988 has annually published a comprehensive volume of the year's best poems and poets. A taste of what it's like can be found here.

Closer to home, the University of Pittsburgh Press' "Pitt Poetry Series" offers a stunningly large list of some of the finest contemporary American poets. We've met some of them in previous ***Book Notes;*** poets such as Sharon Olds, Billy Collins, Norman Dubie, Kathleen Norris, Alicia Ostriker, and Ted Kooser. Just today, bicycling on the peninsula and espying several vultures circling high seeking supper, I thought of Ted Kooser's *Turkey Vultures*:

Turkey Vultures

Circling above us, their wingtips fanned
like fingers, it is as if they were smoothing

one of those tissue-paper sewing patterns
over the pale blue fabric of the air,

touching the heavens with leisurely pleasure,
just a word or two called back and forth,

taking all the time in the world, even though
the sun is low and red in the west, and they

have fallen behind with the making of shrouds. [3]

I have suggested a number of times that the poet's art is to be*present-to-the-present,* to find the magical in the ordinary and then share it in clean, clear language. Ted Kooser breathes that art. You can find out more about the "Pitt

Poetry Series" here.

No, poetry is not a dead art. It is thriving and since President Biden had Amanda Gorman recite her *The Hill We Climb* at the Presidential Inauguration in January, poetry has experienced a bit of a boomlet. Just last week at the Barnes and Noble in Eton-on-Chagrin Boulevard in Cleveland, I counted not the forlorn two or three shelves dedicated to poetry, but four full book cases with an impressive array of small press publications.

So, Jeffersonians, the world seems to be catching on to what we've known all along – poetry is "the real thing," to borrow a phrase from advertising, illumining the whimsical, the serious and the profound, sometimes all at once. Let's take a look at several readers' suggestions: Wally and Will's of Robert Service's *The Cremation of Sam McGee;* Jerry's of Gerard Manley Hopkins' *The Windhover;* and two by Eric – Byron's *The Destruction of Sennacherib* and Mary Oliver's *Hum Hum.*

To say that Eric, a retired marketing executive, is a music aficionado understates the matter by several degrees of magnitude. For many years, he hosted a program on classical and serious music for Cleveland's fine arts radio station WCLV, so his ear is keenly attuned to melody and rhythm. He recommended Byron's *The Destruction of Sennacherib* "which once read, you can't get it out of your head or off your tongue, which rolls around the words in a most delicious rhymed pattern." [4]

Although the poem is about military lore and highlights that people in the Middle East have been killing one another since time out of mind – Sennacherib is the Assyrian conqueror who destroyed Bablyon and was defeated in his attack on Jerusalem when an angel of the Lord intervened – it is the sound of the thing that sticks in Eric's mind. I think you'll agree as you listen to Byron's flowing lines, chiming rhymes and vivid imagery. A reading of it can be found here.

*from* The Destruction of Sennacherib

The Assyrian came down like the wolf on the fold,
And his cohorts were gleaming in purple and gold;
And the sheen of their spears was like stars on the sea,
When the blue wave rolls nightly on deep Galilee.

Like the leaves of the forest when Summer is green,
That host with their banners at sunset were seen:
Like the leaves of the forest when Autumn hath blown,
That host on the morrow lay withered and strown.

For the Angel of Death spread his wings on the blast,
And breathed in the face of the foe as he passed;
And the eyes of the sleepers waxed deadly and chill,
And their hearts but once heaved, and for ever grew still! [4]

It can be argued whether Byron brought one *present-to-the-present*. Certainly in "Sennacherib," I think not. He was working a different vein, using the imaginative power of language to bring history back to life. On occasion, however, he made more personal statements, as in *So We'll Go No More a Roving.* A legendary rake, Byron embodied the romantic notion of the poet as seducer living outside the bounds of conventionality risking dissipation. He knew this about himself and

at the tender of age of 29 decided to reform. A version of it sung by Joan Baez can be found here.

So We'll Go No More a Roving

So, we'll go no more a roving
So late into the night,
Though the heart be still as loving,
And the moon be still as bright.

For the sword outwears its sheath,
And the soul wears out the breast,
And the heart must pause to breathe,
And love itself have rest.

Though the night was made for loving,
And the day returns too soon,
Yet we'll go no more a roving
By the light of the moon. [5]

Regarding "using the imaginative power of language to bring history back to life," Eric's other suggestion, Mary Oliver's *Hum Hum*, uses language to confront and overcome childhood trauma. We've read a number of Oliver's poems in various ***Book Notes*** over the past year, but *Hum Hum* is one of her most intensely personal. Oliver, who grew up in Maple Heights, Ohio, was an abused child – emotionally by her mother, sexually by her father.

Oliver used her art to both escape and then finally confront and transcend her experience. Using the inescapable presence of a swarm of bees on a summer afternoon as a metaphor for her suppressed memories, Oliver shares that only by confronting them can they be overcome.

*from* Hum Hum

1.
One summer afternoon I heard
a looming, mysterious hum
high in the air; then came something

like a small planet flying past–
something

not at all interested in me but on its own
way somewhere, all anointed with excitement:
bees, swarming,

not to be held back.

Nothing could hold them back.

2.
… The child that was myself, that kept running away …

3. SAID THE MOTHER

You are going to grow up
and in order for that to happen
I am going to have to grow old
and then I will die, and the blame
will be yours.

4. OF THE FATHER
He wanted a body
so he took mine.
Some wounds never vanish.
Yet little by little
I learned to love my life.

Though sometimes I had to run hard –
especially from melancholy –

not to be held back.

5.
I think there ought to be
a little music here:
hum, hum.

6.
The resurrection of the morning.
The mystery of the night.
The hummingbird's wings.
The excitement of thunder.
The rainbow in the waterfall.
Wild mustard, that rough blaze of the fields …

Also the words of poets
a hundred or hundreds of years dead –
their words that would not be held back.

7.
Oh the house of denial has thick walls
and very small windows
and whoever lives there, little by little,
will turn to stone …

They were awfully little, those bees,
and maybe frightened,
yet unstoppably they flew on, somewhere,
to live their life.

Hum, hum, hum. [6]

If Byron's "Sennacherib" appeals because of its musicality, then Jerry's suggestion of Gerard Manley Hopkins' *The Windhover,* subtitled *To Christ Our Lord,* will wow you. Going to college in the long ago and far away when everyone was required to take three or four courses in language and literature, I can remember collegemates who only grudgingly read poetry being wowed by Hopkins' language without actually understanding what they were singing as they

sang, “I caught this morning’s minion, king/dom of daylight’s dauphin, dapple-dawn-drawn Falcon, in his riding/Of the rolling level underneath him steady air …”

Of course, it was a Jesuit college, all men at the time and Hopkins was a Jesuit, so he had a head start. The Jesuits (Society of Jesus) are an order of Roman Catholic priests.

Much anthologized and subject to many interpretations, *The Windhover* uses the bird (a windhover is another name for a kestrel, a bird of prey that can hover in midair as it hunts) as a metaphor for Christ or for an epiphany, which is a manifestation of the divine. I think it was Karen Armstrong who said somewhere in one of her many books that the religious impulse has two aspects: the apopathic and the ethical. The latter uses religious teaching and authority to establish and to support a society’s sense of how one ought, which is a moral word, to behave.

Hopkins, however, is interested in the apopathic, which Armstrong defined as the seeker seeking the ineffable, the divine. At first, the seeker is filled with ecstasy and her language filled with joy, but as one approaches closer to the ineffable, to that which cannot be known but only sensed, human language breaks down and can no longer articulate what it apprehends but only share the experience’s emotional intensity.

Hopkins’ *The Windhover* is a beautiful evocation of that spiritual, that mystical journey. At first its language glistens, if one can say a sound “glistens.” It certainly glitters. Hopkins uses alliteration – the repetition of sounds (“daylight’s dauphin, dapple-dawn-drawn”) and onomatopoeia – a word formed from a sound associated with what is named (“wimpling wing,” a phrase as opposed to a word which is an example of both) to convey the energy and intensity of encountering God. But as one approaches closer to the divine and mystical fusion, human language breaks down and can only mutter “No wonder of it: shéer plód makes plough down sillion …” and end in silence.

<u>The Windhover</u>

I caught this morning morning's minion, king-
dom of daylight's dauphin, dapple-dawn-drawn Falcon, in his riding
Of the rolling level underneath him steady air, and striding
High there, how he rung upon the rein of a wimpling wing
In his ecstasy! then off, off forth on swing,
As a skate's heel sweeps smooth on a bow-bend: the hurl and gliding
Rebuffed the big wind. My heart in hiding
Stirred for a bird, – the achieve of, the mastery of the thing.

Brute beauty and valour and act, oh, air, pride, plume, here
Buckle! AND the fire that breaks from thee then, a billion
Times told lovelier, more dangerous, O my chevalier!

No wonder of it: shéer plód makes plough down sillion
Shine, and blue-bleak embers, ah my dear,
Fall, gall themselves, and gash gold-vermilion. [7]

If Eric’s choice of Mary Oliver’s *Hum* touches the personally profound and Jerry’s choice of *The Windhover* the sublimely serious, then Wally and Will’s suggestion

of Robert Service's *The Cremation of Sam McGee* shows poetry's whimsical power to both entertain and to enable one to overcome mind-bending trauma as attested by a wonderful anecdote of John McCain and *Sam McGee*.

Let me explain.

[9] Robert Service, sometimes called "the Bard of the Yukon," was the Billy Collins of the early 20th century, which is to say he managed to earn a fortune writing poetry. His collection of poems *Songs of Sourdough* (1907) "has sold more than three million copies, making it the most commercially successful book of poetry of the 20th century." [8] Service lived a life that should have been made into a movie, but, since it challenged credulity, it would not be believed.

Service had more than a touch of Jack London in the Yukon, Ernest Hemingway in Paris in the twenties and William Faulkner in Hollywood about him. Born in Glasgow, Scotland, Service, reading poetry and trying to be a writer, worked in banking. When his bank sent him to the Canadian Yukon during the Klondike Gold Rush of the 1890s, Service fell in love with the West and stayed. After wandering about California and British Columbia, Service returned to the Yukon. Inspired by incidents he either experienced or heard about, he began to recast them in verse.

Service never called himself a poet. His tales were meant to earn him money. He sought to get them published. The story is complicated and involves Service leaning on his father to influence a friend in Toronto. The upshot is that *The Cremation of Sam McGee*, *The Shooting of Dan McGrew,* and other tales of the Gold Rush were published in 1907 in **Songs of Sourdough**. Although Service never panned for gold or engaged in gunfights, his book of verses about the Gold Rush found an eager and excited audience. They made him independently wealthy.

In 1912, he left the Yukon for Toronto, where the *Toronto Star* sent him as a war correspondent to cover the Balkan War. In 1913, he moved to Paris, settling in the Latin Quarter and living as a painter. During World War I, he served as a Red Cross ambulance driver. After the war, he resettled in Paris living as a gentleman by day and a bohemian by night. He began to write thriller novels. Later in the twenties, he moved to the French Riviera. In the thirties, he visited the Soviet Union and narrowly escaped after the Soviet Union allied with Hitler's Germany. During World War II, Service returned to California, where he landed in Hollywood playing himself in a movie with Marlene Dietrich. He hobnobbed with Hollywood royalty, including John Wayne, Gary Cooper, Randolph Scott, and Dietrich. [11]

After the war, he returned to France, living in Brittany in the summer and Monte Carlo in the winter. He died in 1958. All the while he wrote prolifically. He was one of the best-selling writers of the first half of the 20th century. His thrillers, tales of the Yukon and other writings are largely forgotten today. But two have had some lingering fame, almost independent of their author – *The Cremation of Sam McGee* and *The Shooting of Dan McGrew.*

Like Rudyard Kipling, Service is often accused of writing doggerel – which technically means "comic verse in irregular rhythm," but can also mean "verse or words that are badly written or expressed." [12] Critics usually accuse Service of the latter, but his works are entertaining, easy to follow and immensely popular. *The Cremation of Sam McGee* tells of the cremation of a Klondike prospector who froze to death by the man who cremated him. *The Shooting of Dan McGrew* tells of a gunfight in a Yukon saloon in which two men settle a grudge involving a woman named Lou and "a poke of gold" by shooting each other. "The lady that's known as Lou" gets the "poke of gold." It's an old story made new by Service, or is it a new story by Service that's become old in its thousands of imitations?

Doggerel or not, Service could write. Here is the opening of *The Cremation of Sam McGee* and the ending of *The Shooting of Dan McGrew*.

*from* The Cremation of Sam McGee

There are strange things done in the midnight sun
By the men who moil for gold;
The Arctic trails have their secret tales
That would make your blood run cold;
The Northern Lights have seen queer sights,
But the queerest they ever did see
Was that night on the marge of Lake Lebarge
I cremated Sam McGee. [13]

A video of Johnny Cash reading *The Cremation of Sam McGee* can be found here.

*from* The Shooting of Dan McGrew

… Pitched on his head, and pumped full of lead, was Dangerous Dan McGrew,
While the man from the creeks lay clutched to the breast of the lady that's known as Lou.

These are the simple facts of the case, and I guess I ought to know.

They say that the stranger was crazed with "hooch," and I'm not denying it's so.
I'm not so wise as the lawyer guys, but strictly between us two –
The woman that kissed him and – pinched his poke – was the lady known
as Lou. [14]

A video of a LibriVox recording of *The Shooting of Dan McGrew* can be found here.

Whether sublime or doggerel, poetry can also enable one to persevere through any torment, whether it be talent night on a cruise ship or surviving brutal treatment in a prisoner of war camp. Regarding the former, Wally, who first brought *The Cremation of Sam McGee* to my attention, related an experience he and his wife Gloria had on a cruise "sailing through the French Polynesian Islands about ten years ago," Wally continued, "They had a talent night. I was amazed when a fellow passenger got up and was able to recite the entire Sam McGee poem from memory." [15]

Wally didn't say how the other passengers reacted.

More importantly, Wally shared with me the John McCain anecdote. As Wally wrote, there is:

'a very poignant story about John McCain that I heard for the first time in the days following his death. Back in 2000 he was in the Republican presidential primary and was traveling in the bus called "The Straight Talk Express.' A film crew from Comedy Central came on the bus after a day of campaigning with the thought of getting McCain in a 'gotcha' moment. They asked him if he liked poetry and he hesitated for a moment and then said yes. They pursued this with 'who is your favorite poet?' McCain thought for a moment and finally said "Robert Service." Further, they asked him for the name of his favorite Robert Service poem and McCain finally answered with "The Cremation of Sam McGee." Still not satisfied, they asked him if he could recite some portion of that poem. McCain responded by reciting all 14 verses. This would take about 15 minutes. It turns out that McCain learned this poem from a fellow prisoner in an adjoining cell at the "Hanoi Hilton" during the Vietnam War. They communicated by Morse Code tapping on the wall separating the cells." [16]

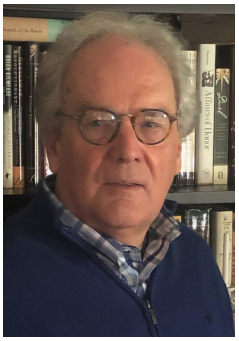
A more complete version of the McCain incident can be found at ***TIME*** magazine's web site, including a one-minute video of McCain discussing poetry, its healing and sustaining power and the "Hanoi Hilton" travail. It can be found here.

As Wally also wryly observed, "Cindy McCain also indicated that he (John) recited that poem to her on their first date. I am surprised they had a second date." [17]

Poetry – it can be sulblime as in Hopkins' *The Windhover;* it can be melodious as in Byron's *The Destruction of Sennachaerib;* it can be healing as in Oliver's *Hum Hum;* and, more often than one might suspect and in places one might not think, it can be life saving.

Keep your suggestions coming. I'm always looking for new discoveries or rediscovering old favorites.

Thank you to Eric, Jerry, and Wally!



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**End Notes**

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Andrew Roth

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