

Book Notes:

Reading in the Time of Coronavirus

By Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence
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What's Your Favorite Poem?

As you have probably noticed, from time to time in *Book Notes* I'll leave history, current events, political philosophy, and other commentary on the spirit of our times aside and turn to one of my great loves – poetry. I just counted and of the 49 *Book Notes*, including this one, about 25 percent have either touched on or emphasized poetry. From the recent Valentine verse to poetry in the time of plague, from Jack Gilbert and Mary Oliver to *Spoon River Anthology* and Walt Whitman and several others, poetry has been a prime feature of *Book Notes: Reading in the Time of Coronavirus*. They, of course, can be found [here](#).

Spoon River Anthology, which was a two-part *Book Notes*, resulted from a suggestion by local doctor and poet Chuck Joy. Not only was poetry a pleasure to rediscover, I also learned that it is a particular favorite of my friend Roy Strausbaugh.

So, what I'd like to do is to ask a favor of *Book Notes* readers: please send me your favorite poem. You don't have to send the entire poem, just the title and author. Don't worry about length; although we have space constraints, we made "Spoon River" work and can do the same for almost any suggestion. I will then include it in a future *Book Notes: Readers' Favorites* accompanied by links to readings of it, assuming they exist, and some research into the poem and its author's background. Send your suggestions to me at roth@jeserie.org.

If you'd rather remain anonymous in your submission, please note that so that we might still feature your selected poem with others.

Since turnabout is fair play, in this short *Book Notes* I'll share two or three of my favorites. For almost as long as I can remember being a serious reader, which for me is longer than I particularly care to remember, the melodic beauty of Walt Whitman's "*When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd*" has resonated and continues to resonate. When I was younger, it was the sound of the thing that I found rapturous. As I have grown older and am now officially old, I understand why some consider it arguably the most profound meditation on death in

American verse.

Written during the summer of 1865 , it is from his series "*Memories of President Lincoln.*" It recounts Lincoln's funeral train's long journey from Washington, D.C. to Illinois and the transcendence of the thrush's singing in the railside, roadside's reedy swamps. It's a long poem, so here is the beginning, a middle verse, and the conclusion.

from When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd

1)

When lilacs last in the dooryard bloom'd,
And the great star early droop'd in the western sky in the night,
I mourn'd, and yet shall mourn with ever-returning spring.

Ever-returning spring, trinity sure to me you bring,
Lilac blooming perennial and drooping star in the west,
And thought of him I love ...

3)

In the dooryard fronting an old farm-house near the white-wash'd palings,
Stands the lilac-bush tall-growing with heart-shaped leaves of rich green,
With many a pointed blossom rising delicate, with the perfume strong I love,
With every leaf a miracle – and from this bush in the dooryard,
With delicate-color'd blossoms and heart-shaped leaves of rich green,
A sprig with its flower I break.

4)

In the swamp in secluded recesses,
A shy and hidden bird is warbling a song.

Solitary the thrush,
The hermit withdrawn to himself, avoiding the settlements,
Sings by himself a song.

Song of the bleeding throat,
Death's outlet song of life, (for well dear brother I know,
If thou wast not granted to sing thou would'st surely die.)

5)

Over the breast of the spring, the land, amid cities,
Amid lanes and through old woods, where lately the violets peep'd from the
ground,
spotting the gray debris,
Amid the grass in the fields each side of the lanes, passing the endless grass,
Passing the yellow-spear'd wheat, every grain from its shroud in the dark-brown
fields uprisen,
Passing the apple-tree blows of white and pink in the orchards,
Carrying a corpse to where it shall rest in the grave,
Night and day journeys a coffin.

13)

Sing on, sing on you gray-brown bird,
Sing from the swamps, the recesses, pour your chant from the bushes,

Limitless out of the dusk, out of the cedars and pines.

Sing on dearest brother, warble your reedy song,
Loud human song, with voice of uttermost woe.

O liquid and free and tender!
O wild and loose to my soul – O wondrous singer!
You only I hear – yet the star holds me, (but will soon depart,)
Yet the lilac with mastering odor holds me.

16)

... Passing, I leave thee lilac with heart-shaped leaves,
I leave thee there in the door-yard, blooming, returning with spring.

I cease from my song for thee,
From my gaze on thee in the west, fronting the west, communing with thee,
O comrade lustrous with silver face in the night.

Yet each to keep and all, retrievments out of the night,
The song, the wondrous chant of the gray-brown bird,
And the tallying chant, the echo arous'd in my soul,
With the lustrous and drooping star with the countenance full of woe,
With the holders holding my hand nearing the call of the bird,
Comrades mine and I in the midst, and their memory ever to keep, for the dead I
loved so well,
For the sweetest, wisest soul of all my days and lands – and this for his dear
sake,
Lilac and star and bird twined with the chant of my soul,
There in the fragrant pines and the cedars dusk and dim. [1]

An uncanny “recreation” of Whitman reading “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard
Bloom’d” can be found [here](#).

Speaking of growing old, William Butler Yeats’ *“Among School Children”* will register with anyone of a certain age who ever looked in a mirror and wondered who the old man or woman looking back could possibly be and how they got there. Yeats wrote the poem in 1926 when he had been appointed Inspector of Schools for the Irish Free State. Explication can kill a poem, but here as briefly as possible, and hopefully not too distortedly, is a brief scan of Yeats’ meditation on aging and the life one lived in becoming who one is.

In alternating stanzas, he compares and contrasts himself as he is now with memories of his youth and his love affair with Maude Gonne. In Stanza I, he is the smiling public man at whom children stare while in Stanza II, invoking the image of Leda and the Swan – Leda loved by Zeus who came to her in the image of a swan (if you’re a god, then you can do that) Yeats recalls that once he and a lover were like an egg’s yolk and white enwound in one. In Stanza III, he comes back to the schoolchildren and wonders did his lover ever stand as a young child before a public man, and in Stanza IV, he thinks of her as she is now – an old woman with hollow cheeks whose plumage, like his, has faded. In Stanza V, he asks would a mother seeing her child at 60 think her birth pangs worth the pain, and in Stanza VI, he asks what use your fine philosophy if it only leads to old age and one become “Old clothes upon old sticks to scare a bird.” In Stanza VII, he muses that both nuns and mothers know that

time ultimately mocks all human enterprise. In Stanza VIII, he muses that life is the fusing of all of one's selves – the things you do and did, the youth you were, the mature lover you became and now the elder you are into one YOU. Like the dancer who cannot be distinguished from the dance, you are the life you lived.

I

I walk through the long schoolroom questioning;
A kind old nun in a white hood replies;
The children learn to cipher and to sing,
To study reading-books and history,
To cut and sew, be neat in everything
In the best modern way – the children's eyes
In momentary wonder stare upon
A sixty-year-old smiling public man.

II

I dream of a Ledaean body, bent
Above a sinking fire, a tale that she
Told of a harsh reproof, or trivial event
That changed some childish day to tragedy –
Told, and it seemed that our two natures blent
Into a sphere from youthful sympathy,
Or else, to alter Plato's parable,
Into the yolk and white of the one shell.

III

And thinking of that fit of grief or rage
I look upon one child or t'other there
And wonder if she stood so at that age –
For even daughters of the swan can share
Something of every paddler's heritage –
And had that colour upon cheek or hair,
And thereupon my heart is driven wild:
She stands before me as a living child.

IV

Her present image floats into the mind—
Did Quattrocento finger fashion it
Hollow of cheek as though it drank the wind
And took a mess of shadows for its meat?
And I though never of Ledaean kind
Had pretty plumage once – enough of that,
Better to smile on all that smile, and show
There is a comfortable kind of old scarecrow.

V

What youthful mother, a shape upon her lap
Honey of generation had betrayed,
And that must sleep, shriek, struggle to escape
As recollection or the drug decide,
Would think her son, did she but see that shape
With sixty or more winters on its head,
A compensation for the pang of his birth,
Or the uncertainty of his setting forth?

VI

Plato thought nature but a spume that plays
Upon a ghostly paradigm of things;
Solider Aristotle played the taws
Upon the bottom of a king of kings;
World-famous golden-thighed Pythagoras
Fingered upon a fiddle-stick or strings
What a star sang and careless Muses heard:
Old clothes upon old sticks to scare a bird.

VII

Both nuns and mothers worship images,
But those the candles light are not as those
That animate a mother's reveries,
But keep a marble or a bronze repose.
And yet they too break hearts – O Presences
That passion, piety or affection knows,
And that all heavenly glory symbolise –
O self-born mockers of man's enterprise;

VIII

Labour is blossoming or dancing where
The body is not bruised to pleasure soul,
Nor beauty born out of its own despair,
Nor blear-eyed wisdom out of midnight oil.
O chestnut tree, great rooted blossomer,
Are you the leaf, the blossom or the bole?
O body swayed to music, O brightening glance,
How can we know the dancer from the dance? [2]

A reading of “Among School Children” can be found [here](#).

Not necessarily simpler, but certainly more immediate and accessible is this celebration of the pure joy of just living. Mary Oliver’s affirmations of life seem to me to transcend the merely mundane, although she often finds in the mundane the most profound pleasures! There is a poem by Jack Gilbert musing how life is not the big things, the big moments that even Yeats sometimes seems to obsess about, but rather that life is all the in-between moments when nothing seems to be happening. Since that is most of one’s life, it is important to stop and pay attention. Paying attention is what Mary Oliver does better than almost anyone.

Climbing the Chagrin River

We enter
the green river,
heron harbor,
mud-basin lined
with snagheaps, where turtles
sun themselves – we push
through the falling
silky weight
striped warm and cold

bounding down
through the black flanks
of wet rocks – we wade
under hemlock
and white pine – climb
stone steps into
the timeless castles
of emerald eddies,
swirls, channels
cold as ice tumbling
out of a white flow
– sheer sheets
flying off rocks,
frivolous and lustrous,
skirting the secret pools
– cradles
full of the yellow hair
of last year's leaves
where grizzled fish
hang halfway down,
like tarnished swords,
while around them
fingerlings sparkle
and descend,
nails of light
in the loose
racing waters.

So, what is your favorite poem? Send me your suggestions. I am always eager to discover new things or reacquaint myself with old favorites. Send your ideas to roth@jeserie.org.



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End Notes

1. Whitman, Walt. "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd" in **Whitman: Poetry and Prose**. (New York: The Library of America, 1982), pp. 459-467.
2. Yeats, William Butler. "Among School Children," in **W.B. Yeats: The Poems**. (London: Everyman's Library, 1992), pp. 261-263.
3. Oliver, Mary. "Climbing the Chagrin River," in **American Primitive**. (Boston: Little Brown and Company, 1983), pp. 75-76.

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In Case You Missed It

[Who was George Washington?](#) written by Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence Dr. Andrew Roth

[Mister Peanut: Annual Neighborhood Visitor](#) written by prolific author, historian, and Jefferson presenter, Dr. David Frew.

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