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Classic Book Notes #56

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'This and That' & Wallace Stevens

Editor's note: Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence Andrew Roth was at Chautauqua Institution for a week of lectures last week. Below is a second look at his Book Notes #56, "This and That" on Wallace Stevens. It was first published on April 15, 2021.

Dr. Roth's Book Notes series will continue on September 8 with #114 on Lillian Faderman's "Woman: The American History of an Idea" and #115 on September 15 on the best "book note" ever written – Francis Bacon's "Of Studies."



Wallace Stevens [1]

One of the joys of writing these **Book Notes** is that there is never a shortage of things to write about and to explore. Just now, looking over the pile of books on the table by my desk, I note Ty Seidule's **Robert E. Lee and Me**, a retired Army Brigadier General, Ph.D. in History, and head of the History Department at West Point. In a future **Book Note**, I intend to compare his meditation on his Southern upbringing with Fitzgerald's **The Great Gatsby**, Dr. Seuss, and Mr. Potato Head as a portal into discussing cancel culture.

Just next to it are Helen Andrews' **Boomers: The Men and Women Who Promised Freedom and Delivered Disaster** and Julie Filipovic's **OK Boomer, Let's Talk**, both of which flog an issue we looked at almost a year ago in **Book Notes #7** – did the baby boomers break America? The answer to which is “Yes and No,” but the “Yes” part isn't (wasn't) who you might think. **Book Notes #7** can be found [here](#).

Speaking of a broken or divided America, somewhere in that pile is James Shapiro's brilliant **Shakespeare in a Divided America**. Using America's historic fascination with Shakespeare – **Shakespeare In Love** won an Oscar in 1999 and Lincoln's two books growing up were a one-volume complete works of Shakespeare and the Bible, which more or less constituted a typical 19th century American household library – Shapiro explores America's shifting attitudes towards miscegenation, Manifest Destiny, Class Warfare, Immigration, Marriage, Adultery, and Same-Sex Love.

And some thought the Bard passe!

Others in the pile include **A Pocket History of Human Evolution: How We Became Sapiens**, Paul Martin's **Secret Heroes: Everyday Americans**

Who Shaped Our World and, proving “*The ’60s*” perennial interest, the sixth edition of Isserman and Kazin’s ***America Divided: The Civil War of the 1960s***. There are more, but in this **Book Notes** I want to continue our exploration of readers’ reactions to poetry.

When on February 25 in **Book Notes #49** I asked, “What’s Your Favorite Poem?” I expected to get a handful of suggestions. I received more than 30. We have looked at a number of them in the last two **Book Notes**. In a future **Book Notes**, we will examine Julie’s suggestion of Stanley Kunitz’s “*Touch Me*,” Wally and Will’s suggestion of Robert Service’s “*The Cremation of Sam McGee*,” Doug’s suggestion of W.S. Merwin’s “*Shadow of Sirius*,” several suggestions by James, and Jerry’s suggestion of Gerard Manley Hopkins’ “*The Windhover*.”

Reader reactions ranged from those of you who are frequent and experienced readers of poetry to those excited by rediscovering and, in some cases, just discovering poetry’s pleasure. Many enjoyed Billy Collins’ easy accessibility, which is a key to his popularity, but others mused about what poems mean and how to read a poem. Those last two questions are neither naïve nor simple. They are, in fact, the heart of the matter.

A poem means what it means. And you read it by just simply reading it, attending to the words’ literal meaning and emotional connotations and trusting yourself – “trusting your gut,” as the saying goes – that your sense of its meaning is almost certainly what the poet meant.

A poem is not a puzzle to be solved; it is an experience to be savored.

Without turning this into an English class, I will try to make some sense of that statement. In the last week or two, I have found myself in several conversations touching on whether a “flawed” person can be a great artist, if God exists, and how to read a poem. Let’s see if we can wrap all three of those “big” questions together by looking at several poems by Wallace Stevens.

The flawed-person question arose in a conversation about the recent PBS Ken Burns production of “*Hemingway*,” which was a biographical sketch and critical appraisal of the life and work of Ernest Hemingway. Hemingway was a complicated and damaged man. He was an alcoholic, a bully, a narcissist, and an abuser, but he wrote several of the finest short stories and novels in American literature. For many people, his unconventional, neo-Byronic persona defines what it means to be an artist.

While artists are always in some ways on the outside looking in, which gives them their vantage point and perspective to see what those on the inside, like fish in water, may not see because they lack perspective, is it possible to be on the inside, to be conventional, while at the same time being on the outside looking in? Or, in

short, is it possible to be both an insider and outsider, to be both conventional and unconventional, to be both a layman and an artist?

Although Wallace Stevens once lost a fist fight with Hemingway in Key West and while scarcely flawless (who is?), he walked that tightrope. Born in 1879 in Reading, Pennsylvania, Stevens was a descendant of the earliest settlers of the Susquehanna Valley. His father was a prosperous lawyer who sent Stevens to Harvard. An accomplished student, by the end of his third year Stevens had garnered all of the school's writing awards. [3] Stevens left Harvard after three years to pursue a career in journalism in New York City.

A person accustomed to living well, Stevens abandoned journalism to become a lawyer like his father and two brothers. After graduating from New York Law School, he began working for several law firms in New York City. In 1908, he accepted a position with the American Bonding Company. In the 19-teens, he changed jobs once or twice, but in 1916 he accepted a position with the Hartford Accident and Indemnity Company. An expert in insurance law, Stevens had an extremely successful career at the Hartford as he rose in 1934 to the position of vice president.

As the Poetry Foundation notes, "unlike many aspiring artists he was hardly stifled by steady employment." [2] For, all the while, Stevens also wrote poetry. He became one of the 20th century's major American poets, some even say *the* major American poet. Although he is a favorite of mine and three or four of his poems are among the finest written by an American, I am not prepared to say he is *the* major American poet of the 20th century.

But he is one of them, that is beyond dispute. So, can a flawed person be a great artist? Yes, of course, but it is not a job requirement. For the poet and lawyer, insurance executive Stevens was, in some respects, as conventional a person as one might conjure. Married to his wife Elsie for 46 years until his death in 1955, he lived in upper middleclass comfort all of his days. He was close to his daughter Holly Stevens, who spent a great deal of her life editing his papers and letters. Yet, conventional [4] as he might have been, Stevens is Hemingway's peer as an artist. Although Stevens is considerably less famous as a personality, some might argue he is Hemingway's superior as an artist.

Stevens was a modernist poet. The modernist movement dominated the arts in the early 20th century. Ezra Pound's 1934 "Make it new!" captured the modernist spirit of experimentation in form, diction, and technique. Aesthetes, they had a special appreciation for art and beauty, but at the same time attempted to use art to express ideas and to employ the imagination to counter the press of reality. Reacting to the rapid social changes wrought by science and technology, modernists rejected outmoded literary traditions inherited from the Romantic Movement. Shrivens by the devastation of World War I, they also rejected the

certainty of rationalist Enlightenment thinking. Many modernists, unable to reconcile the ambiguity and uncertainty revealed by modern philosophy, also rejected religious belief. Unable to answer in the positive the question whether or not God existed, many sought transcendence in art. Some, like Stevens, thought that the physical, sensual world was all that existed. Not exactly hedonists, they deployed the imagination to apprehend the beauty in the physical world and found in that apprehension a kind of transcendence.

Stevens was a master of all of this. In poems like “The Snow Man,” “The Emperor of Ice-Cream,” “The Comedian as the Letter ‘C’,” “The Idea of Order at Key West,” “Peter Quince at the Clavier,” “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird,” “The Man with the Blue Guitar,” and “Sunday Morning,” he imaginatively confronted the *is-that-is* and found it was more than enough. One might say he came to peace with the notion that life did not have to make sense in any ultimate, teleological sense – that it did not have to mean anything. It simply was. The poet’s job was – is – to help us see that, and seeing it, find peace within it.

How to read a poem? [5] As I said earlier, just read it, trust your own understanding. A poem is not a puzzle to solve; it is to be enjoyed for such insight as it affords. To help find that insight, ask yourself who is speaking – the poet in her own voice, or is she assuming another persona? How is the language being used – what do the words mean? Are there any unclear references? After asking and answering these very basic questions, re-read the poem. Again, trust your judgment and the poet’s skill – what you think it means is probably what it means. Of course, there are layers of meaning as your imaginative understanding mixes with the poet’s imaginative utterings as the combination makes the experience richer.

Remembering that explication can kill a poem – can strangle the imaginative word play that gives the poem meaning – and remembering what Billy Collins said in “*Introduction to Poetry*” that rather than simply letting their imagination lead them into the experience of a poem, some people want to tie it to a chair and beat it with a rubber hose to find out what it means – let’s take a look at two or three poems by Stevens to hone our skill. And, with our skill honed, see what Stevens has to say about a world in which appreciating the warmth of the sun or the cold of snow might be all there is.

The Snow Man

One must have a mind of winter
To regard the frost and the boughs
Of the pine-trees crusted with snow;

And have been cold a long time
To behold the junipers shagged with ice,

The spruces rough in the distant glitter

Of the January sun; and not to think
Of any misery in the sound of the wind,
In the sound of the few leaves,

Which is the sound of the land
Full of the same wind
That is blowing in the same bare place

For the listener, who listens in the snow,
And, nothing himself, beholds
Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is. [6]

Who is speaking? It's Stevens – the poet – speaking in his own voice sharing an observation. The language is clean, literal. Its meaning is transparent. It is a beautiful description of a snow man on an icy January day that uses language to transcend the moment and to touch the eternal as the poet recognizes the beauty of the moment, that the beauty is self-contained, and that recognition is its own form of bliss and that is more than enough.

Making the same point, that the world is all there is and imaginatively understanding that “*truth*” is as close to transcendence – escaping the fact of one’s mortality – that one can attain, is Stevens’ “The Emperor of Ice-Cream.” But it is a less transparent, more oblique poem than “*The Snow Man*,” for there are two or three allusions that might require explaining. Still, even if they are left unexplained and vague, the basic theme that simple being, simply being alive, is all there is echoes clearly in the lines, “Let be be finale of seem/The only emperor is the emperor of ice-cream.”

The Emperor of Ice-Cream

Call the roller of big cigars,
The muscular one, and bid him whip
In kitchen cups concupiscent curds.
Let the wenches dawdle in such dress
As they are used to wear, and let the boys
Bring flowers in last month’s newspapers.
Let be be finale of seem.
The only emperor is the emperor of ice-cream.

Take from the dresser of deal
Lacking the three glass knobs, that sheet
On which she embroidered fantails once
And spread it so as to cover her face.

If her horny feet protrude, they come
To show how cold she is, and dumb.
Let lamp affix its beam.
The only emperor is the emperor of ice-cream. [7]

OK, admittedly, this one is not nearly as transparent as “The Snow Man,” but even in its obscureness the basic theme of joy in the pure, sensual pleasure of reality – in this instance, the pure sensual pleasure of ice cream as metaphor for all reality – shines. But what else is going on? What is the scene? Who is speaking?

Keeping Billy Collins in mind and setting aside the rubber hose, the poet is at a wake for an old woman who has died. Rather than mourn, he exhorts those present to celebrate. How best to celebrate but with ice cream, which he connects to sexual or sensual pleasure by calling it “concupiscent curds,” concupiscent meaning filled with lust or sexual desire. Ice cream – the perfect antidote to death. (**Historical aside** – those of us in 2021 awash in Haagen-Däz and Ben & Jerrys probably can’t understand how a 100 years ago ice cream was a luxury that seemed sinful in its pure physical pleasure). Stevens wrote this poem in Key West, hence the roller of big cigars, wenches dawdling, and boys bringing flowers in yesterday’s newspaper (another casualty of our online world). A dresser of deal is just a cheap pine clothes dresser that has apparently lost two knobs; the sheet is one the dead woman embroidered and her horny feet are simply callused.

We are (I’m) coming close to killing it with explication’s rubber hose, but with those few facts in hand read it again. One finds, upon a second reading, what wakes are supposed to be – not a time to mourn but a time to celebrate a life. Or, more generally, not to bemoan our fate as those who die but to celebrate our great good fortune that we got *to be* at all – “*let be be finale of seem.*”

Although Stevens is said to have converted to Roman Catholicism on his death bed, an assertion his daughter Holly always denied, in his poetry Stevens rejected belief in a personalized God who intervenes in history. At the risk of putting words in his mouth, Stevens probably agreed with the Taoist admonition that the one who can be named is not the one. I doubt that he actually gave it that much thought, but he did practice a deep spirituality that found succor in the sun’s warmth, in the light dappling on a lake and on a swallow’s wing. He found peace and transcendence in meditating upon the natural beauty surrounding us. He gave that insight its greatest expression in “*Sunday Morning*,” in which he ruminates about God and metaphysics and simple being as a woman enjoys her coffee and oranges in her sunroom on Sunday morning, which I will not explicate further trusting you will find the wisdom in its eloquence.

from Sunday Morning

Complacencies of the peignoir, and late

Coffee and oranges in a sunny chair,
And the green freedom of a cockatoo
Upon a rug mingle to dissipate
The holy hush of ancient sacrifice. ...

Why should she give her bounty to the dead?
What is divinity if it can come
Only in silent shadows and in dreams?
Shall she not find in comforts of the sun,
In pungent fruit and bright, green wings, or else
In any balm or beauty of the earth,
Things to be cherished like the thought of heaven?

... We live in an old chaos of the sun,
Or old dependency of day and night,
Or island solitude, unsponsored, free,
Of that wide water, inescapable.
Deer walk upon our mountains, and the quail
Whistle about us their spontaneous cries;
Sweet berries ripen in the wilderness;
And, in isolation of the sky,
At evening, casual flocks of pigeons make
Ambiguous undulations as they sink,
Downward to darkness, on extended wings. [8]

So, we have seen you don't need to be a jerk – *pace* Hemingway – to be an artist; that the modernist sensibility sought God in beauty; and that in reading a poem one needs to trust one's own intelligence and in so trusting will get most of it most of the time. On occasion, however, some quick research will bring a dead word or allusion back to life and enrich and deepen the meaning of your reading.

Thanks to my readers for suggesting poems worth our attention. After several weeks exploring poetry, next week it's back to other topics seeking to find out what ***The Great Gatsby***, Potato Head, Dr. Seuss, the Southern myth of The Lost Cause and cancel culture have in common.

Wallace Stevens' poetry can be found at the Poetry Foundation [here](#) and at The American Academy of Poets [here](#).

Bill Murray reading two poems by Wallace Stevens can be found [here](#).

Tom O'Bedlam reading "The Emperor of Ice-Cream" can be found [here](#).

An interesting multi-media reading of "Sunday Morning" can be found [here](#).



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End Notes

1. *Photo of Wallace Stevens*; from **Wikiwand** available [here](#) accessed April 11, 2021.
2. "*Wallace Stevens*," **The Poetry Foundation** available [here](#) accessed April 12, 2021.
3. *Ibid.*
4. In this short essay, there is not sufficient space to describe how Stevens balanced his dualistic life as executive by day, poet by night. Thomas Grey in his ***The Wallace Stevens Case*** (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991) tried. Stevens life was not quite as conventional as it first appears, but it was close. Outside of the office, he lived almost monastically. He came to dislike his wife. He composed most of his poems on long walks or during his morning commute. He would give his notes to his secretary to type and then make revisions. He enjoyed travel, particularly to Key West, where the skirmish with Hemingway happened. His "The Idea of Order at Key West" is one of his most important poems. Still, Stevens is, if not unique, very rare – that artist who balanced a very mainstream existence with a very counter cultural imagination. In fact, Stevens believed imagination is what protected one from the pressure of reality.
5. For those who really want to get into this, check out the Academy of American Poets "How to Read a Poem" at [poets.org](#) available [here](#) accessed April 13, 2021.
6. Stevens, Wallace. "*The Snow Man*," in ***The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens***. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1978), pp. 9-10.
7. _____. "*The Emperor of Ice-Cream*," in ***The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens***. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1978), p. 64.
8. _____. "*Sunday Morning*," in ***The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens***. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1978), p. 66-70.

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