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Autumn Poems

Today – Sept. 22 – is the autumnal equinox. Some call it the first day of autumn, which, as you might recall from an August ***Book Note*** celebrating the watermelon, is not technically accurate. The equinox and solstices are not the first day of the season, but actually the season's apex or midpoint, after which it falls (no pun intended) off. It is an admittedly pedantic quibble of mine, but the seasons actually start and end four to six weeks before and after.

Regarding the autumnal equinox, it usually falls (there's that word again) on either Sept. 22 or 23, and can fall as early as Sept. 21 and as late as Sept. 24.

More than a few people get confused and think it the 21st, but in the 21st century the autumnal equinox will fall on Sept. 21 only twice – in 2092 and 2096. I think it a reasonably safe wager that most readers of these ***Book Notes*** need neither note nor worry about that minor factoid. Even rarer is a Sept. 24 autumnal equinox, the last of which occurred in 1931 and the next will not occur until 2303. [1]

Regardless of all of that, Sept. 22 signals autumn's, if not arrival, full-fledged recognition. It is harvest season. The harvest season climaxes on Oct. 31, which in Celtic pagan cultures was the last day of the year before the dark season began on Nov. 1. In pagan northern climes, it occasioned a major holiday as the folk brought in the sheaves, so to speak, slaughtered the pig, and began to worry did they have enough food to last until the sun's return at the vernal equinox. It also gave us Halloween, which Robert Burns memorably evoked in his poem "Halloween" giving us the origins of all of our Halloween customs. It's lengthy, but can be found in its entirety here. We wrote about it in ***Book Notes*** #78 *"Boo! It's Halloween"* which can be found here. A video of Cameron Goodall reciting it in proper Scots can be found here.

Less melodramatically than the angst of surviving oncoming winter, autumn has always served as a metaphorical reminder that life is short. For others, it is the year's favorite season, for its relatively moderate temperatures still hint at summer but with less annoying heat. And, in the north with its deciduous trees aflame with color, it is the year's most beautiful season.

All of which – intimations of mortality; pleasant days, and cool, crisp evenings; and the woodlands brimming with color – has inspired many a poet, more than a few of whom had the talent to match their grasp to their reach.

What have the poets had to say about autumn?

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Aside: Several readers have asked me when I do these ***Book Notes*** about the best (or at least the one's I like) poems about a holiday, baseball, or whatever, where do I get my selections. Well, from three sources: 1) my personal biases (those I like); 2) searching the internet for poems I might have missed, or new ones about which I am unaware; and, 3) going back through my own collection of several hundred books of poetry to find old favorites and new ones to enjoy.

Regarding the internet, it is awash in poetry. It has generated a major (or at least a very large) rebirth of interest in poetry. One result, as you might have guessed, are innumerable lists of the Ten Best Poems or just poems for this or that holiday, life event, and topic of interest. Of them all, the best are one a British professor of English literature Oliver Tearle compiles titled "Interesting

Literature", which can be found here; the Poetry Foundation's special topic listings, which for Fall Poems can be found here; and the American Academy of Poets list, which can be found here.

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So, with that variation on a bibliographic note aside, what are my takes (and others') on the best autumnal poems?

Well, I won't argue best, but these are some that have repeatedly over the years (now for decades and decades) snagged my notice. As always, I'll begin with "Billy Boy" Shakespeare, as an old English prof of mine, the late Dr. Robert Yackshaw of John Carroll University insisted on calling him in order to demystify him, to make him more human, less of an unapproachable icon and inexplicable genius. I'll also, as always, include at least one by Jack Gilbert and conclude with another by Mary Oliver.

Dr. Yackshaw wanted one to see Shakespeare as a human being, and not as some demigod come down to Earth. Making him human increased his genius and by extension our appreciation of him. I find boring the arguments about who he might have been, most of which are rearguard actions by English social elitists (think aristocrats and gentry, who, despite Americans' seemingly inexhaustible *Masterpiece Theater* interest in them are, as Oscar Wilde memorably characterized the fox hunting English gentry in his ***A Woman of No Importance,*** "The unspeakable in full pursuit of the uneatable"). The English elite, or some, simply can't accept, even at this late date, that the Stratford glovemaker's son did what he all but certainly did.

Shakespeare's genius, as I quoted Helen Vendler in a recent ***Book Note*** on summer poems, "is his capacity to confer greater and greater mental scope on any whim of the imagination, enacting that widening gradually so that the experience of reading a poem becomes the experience of pushing back the horizons of thought". [2] In the following Sonnet #73 Shakespeare begins with a simple observation that in gazing upon him his lover sees only the remnants of age ("yellow leaves") hanging upon the withered skeleton of his aging self ("bare ruined choirs" = leave-less trees). That Shakespeare was only 30 (probably younger) at the time he wrote the poem speaks to his ability to imaginatively command a scene he had not yet experienced. From that he expands to a meditation on death ("after the sunset fadeth in the west") and in the third quatrain expands even that metaphor by likening his aging body/self as the last ashes of his burning youth. He pivots from these tokens of gloom to end on a positive affirmation of love, for as he tells his beloved he recognizes that it only makes his lover's love stronger that he loves one who must soon leave (die).

Sonnet #73

That time of year thou mayst in me behold
When yellow leaves, or none, or few, do hang
Upon those boughs which shake against the cold,
Bare ruined choirs, where late the sweet birds sang.
In me thou see'st the twilight of such day
As after sunset fadeth in the west;
Which by and by black night doth take away,
Death's second self, that seals up all in rest.
In me thou see'st the glowing of such fire,
That on the ashes of his youth doth lie,
As the deathbed whereon it must expire,
Consumed with that which it was nourished by.
This thou perceiv'st, which makes thy love more strong,
To love that well which thou must leave ere long. [3]

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Since we've begun with Shakespeare, we might as well continue with several more classic autumnal poems, the most famous of which is John Keats' "To Autumn." Oliver Tearle, in that listing I mentioned above, says Keats' poem is "(P)robably the most famous poem about the season in all of English literature … and one of the finest poems in the language." [4] I am not sure I agree with Tearle about that last comment, but it is, nonetheless, a fine poem.

Tearle inspired me to take down from my shelves a copy of Keats' complete poems in which an inscription on the flyleaf tells me I have been lugging it about since Spring 1969, when I was in graduate school at Case Western Reserve University. Since that was 53 years ago, it was "most definitely," as an Executive Assistant of mine was fond of uttering, a long time ago in the springtime of my life, which life is now, if not in its winter, "most definitely" in its late autumn. A footnote to the poem by the edition's editor, one Clarence DeWitt Thorpe, comments on the poems rich, sensuous imagery by quoting a letter from Keats to his close friend John Hamilton Reynolds: "How beautiful the season is now. How fine the air – a temperate sharpness about it. Really without joking, a chaste weather – Dian skies – I never liked stubble-fields so much as now – Aye better than the chilly green of the spring. Somehow a stubble-field looks warm – in the same way some pictures look warm. This struck me so much in my Sunday walk that I composed upon it." [4]

People often wonder, where do artists get their ideas? By just being attentive to the present. As I've often remarked, the great artists help us see what they see by making us more ***present-to-the-present***. In short, they help us to ***"be here now."***

Oh, by the way, that Keats' comment about "a chaste weather – Dian skies" alludes to Diana, the Roman goddess of the hunt and moon. She was famous for being a chilly, distant virgin, whom no man could ever touch. She evokes autumn with its crisp air and clear skies.

To Autumn

Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness,
  Close bosom-friend of the maturing sun;
Conspiring with him how to load and bless
  With fruit the vines that round the thatch-eaves run;
To bend with apples the moss'd cottage-trees,
  And fill all fruit with ripeness to the core;
    To swell the gourd, and plump the hazel shells
  With a sweet kernel; to set budding more,
And still more, later flowers for the bees,
Until they think warm days will never cease,
    For summer has o'er-brimm'd their clammy cells.

Who hath not seen thee oft amid thy store?
  Sometimes whoever seeks abroad may find
Thee sitting careless on a granary floor,
  Thy hair soft-lifted by the winnowing wind;
Or on a half-reap'd furrow sound asleep,
  Drows'd with the fume of poppies, while thy hook
    Spares the next swath and all its twined flowers:
And sometimes like a gleaner thou dost keep
  Steady thy leaden head across a brook;
  Or by a cyder-press, with patient look,
    Thou watchest the last oozings hours by hours.

Where are the songs of spring? Ay, Where are they?
  Think not of them, thou hast thy music too,—
While barred clouds bloom the soft-dying day,
  And touch the stubble-plains with rosy hue;
Then in a wailful choir the small gnats mourn
  Among the river sallows, borne aloft
    Or sinking as the light wind lives or dies;
And full-grown lambs loud bleat from hilly bourn;
  Hedge-crickets sing; and now with treble soft
  The red-breast whistles from a garden-croft;
    And gathering swallows twitter in the skies. [5]

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In this ***Book Note*** on poetry we seem to be going all-in with samples from the indisputably "great" English poets, so let's take a look at one of my personal favorites – William Butler Yeats' "The Wild Swans at Coole." I've been to Coole Park in County Galway in the west of Ireland, been to Yeats' Tower where he wrote in a sort of self-aware romantic isolation and even have a mug to prove it. It sits atop a cabinet near my desk filled with pencils and pens, Yeats' "The Lake Isle of Innisfree" inscribed on its side.

Coole Park is now a nature reserve, but in the late 19th and early-20th century it was the domain of Lady Gregory. An Irish dramatist, folklorist and theater manager, Isabella Augusta, Lady Gregory cofounded the Irish Literary Theater with Yeats and Edward Martyn. Like Yeats, testifying to the complexities of nationalism and nationality, she was also an Anglo-Irish protestant of the class that ruled Ireland before Irish independence in the 1920s. Like Yeats, she rejected her English identity and identified herself with her Irish roots. Like Yeats, she was a passionate advocate for Irish cultural nationalism. Her estate at Coole became a haven for Irish literary figures such as George Bernard Shaw, John Millington Synge, and, of course, William Butler Yeats. Shaw called her "the greatest living Irishwoman."

Yeats, however, benefited most from Coole Park, first arriving there in 1897. He was exhausted both physically and mentally. Lady Gregory nursed him back to health prescribing for him "a balanced regimen of work and relaxation…while he stayed, he really lived in another world. As he wandered the woods and grounds, lost in the landscape of the imagination…". [7] In "The Wild Swans at Coole" Yeats notes that this is the 19th autumn he has spent at Coole Park, which would make it the autumn of 1915 only months before 1916's "Easter Rising." Obviously, in the fall of 1915 he could not have known what would happen on Easter 1916, but he could intuit the change "the troubles" might bring. Regardless, he uses the image of the swans, the twilight water, the bright sky ("Dian's sky") to meditate upon life's inconstancy and time's passing.

<u>The Wild Swans at Coole</u>

The trees are in their autumn beauty,
The woodland paths are dry,
Under the October twilight the water
Mirrors a still sky;
Upon the brimming water among the stones
Are nine-and-fifty swans.

The nineteenth autumn has come upon me

Since I first made my count;
I saw, before I had well finished,
All suddenly mount
And scatter wheeling in great broken rings
Upon their clamorous wings.

I have looked upon those brilliant creatures,
And now my heart is sore.
All's changed since I, hearing at twilight,
The first time on this shore,
The bell-beat of their wings above my head,
Trod with a lighter tread.

Unwearied still, lover by lover,
They paddle in the cold
Companionable streams or climb the air;
Their hearts have not grown old;
Passion or conquest, wander where they will,
Attend upon them still.

But now they drift on the still water,
Mysterious, beautiful;
Among what rushes will they build,
By what lake's edge or pool
Delight men's eyes when I awake some day
To find they have flown away? [8]

***

Before there was Neil Young, there was Carl Sandburg who sang, in the sense that all poetry is lyric and a sort of song, of the harvest moon.

What is a “harvest moon”? Well, for one thing, as you read this on Sept. 22 or later, it has already passed because it appears, or appeared in 2022, between Sept. 9 and 11. The year has many moons with names, such as Sturgeon Moon and Beaver Moon. As the Farmer’s Almanac notes, “(M)ost of these names come from the Algonquin, a Native American peoples that once inhabited large areas of North America, especially the North Central United States and Canada.” [9]

The Harvest Moon is the full Moon closest to the autumnal equinox; it usually occurs in September, but can fall in early October. Because of the equinox and the slightly enhanced tilt of the Earth, the moon rises a bit earlier than it does at other times of the year, which gives farmers a bit of extra light for harvesting crops – hence the name. [10]

UNDER THE HARVEST MOON

Under the harvest moon,
When the soft silver
Drips shimmering
Over the garden nights,
Death, the gray mocker,
Comes and whispers to you
As a beautiful friend
Who remembers.
Under the summer roses
When the flagrant crimson
Lurks in the dusk
Of the wild red leaves,
Love, with little hands,
Comes and touches you
With a thousand memories,
And asks you
Beautiful, unanswerable questions. [11]

Of course, most readers of these ***Book Notes*** are much more familiar with Neil Young's "Harvest Moon." I've been a Neil Young fan since at least the 1970s; he's one of, if not ***the*** greatest country-folk-rock singers of the past now almost 50 years. I've always thought of him as a Bob Dylan who could actually sing. The official music video of Neil Young performing "Harvest Moon", in which he sings "there's a full moon risin'/Let's go dancin' in the light" because he wants to see his beloved "dance again/Because I'm still in love with you/On this harvest moon" can be found here.

Harvest Moon

Come a little bit closer
Hear what I have to say
Just like children sleepin'
We could dream this night away

But there's a full moon risin'
Let's go dancin' in the light
We know where the music's playin'
Let's go out and feel the night

Because I'm still in love with you
I want to see you dance again
Because I'm still in love with you

On this harvest moon

When we were strangers
I watched you from afar
When we were lovers
I loved you with all my heart

But now it's gettin' late
And the moon is climbin' high
I want to celebrate
See it shinin' in your eye

Because I'm still in love with you
I want to see you dance again
Because I'm still in love with you
On this harvest moon

Because I'm still in love with you
I want to see you dance again
Because I'm still in love with you
On this harvest moon [12]

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Not necessarily better than Neil Young, but more overtly literary is Robert Louis Stevenson's "Autumn Fires," which for readers of a certain age should evoke memories of the acrid but slightly sweet scent of autumn leaves burning in the street after raking. Now outlawed for fear of air pollution, probably a sensible decision but sensible has made one of autumn's primeval joys a gone pleasure.

<u>Autumn Fires</u>

In the other gardens
And all up the vale,
From the autumn bonfires
See the smoke trail!
Pleasant summer over
And all the summer flowers,
The red fire blazes,
The grey smoke towers.
Sing a song of seasons!
Something bright in all!
Flowers in the summer,
Fires in the fall! [13]

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Although it never mentions the words “autumn” or “autumnal,” Jack Gilbert’s “After Love” is autumnal in tone, which Merriam-Webster defines, other than the obvious technical connection to the equinox, as “a period of maturity or incipient decline” as “in the autumn of life.” Among its synonyms are afterlife, afternoon, age, and evening. [14] All of which connote or suggest impending loss or loss’s aftermath.

<u>After Love</u>

He is watching the music with his eyes closed.
Hearing the piano like a man moving
through the woods thinking by feeling.
The orchestra up in the trees, the heart below,
step by step. The music hurrying sometimes,
but always returning to quiet, like the man
remembering and hoping. It is a thing in us,
mostly unnoticed. There is somehow a pleasure
in the loss. In the yearning. The pain
going this way and that. Never again.
Never bodied again. Again the never.
Slowly. No undergrowth. Almost leaving.
A humming beauty in the silence.
The having been. Having had. And the man
knowing all of him will come to the end. [15]

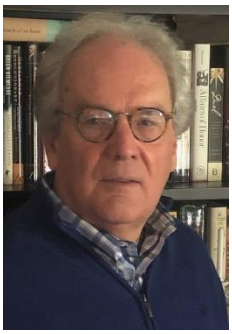
As always, let’s conclude these brief poetic selections with Mary Oliver’s “Song for Autumn,” which is not “autumnal” at all but alive to life’s shifting presence in all its aspects. It’s actually a song of hope bringing us more ***present-to-the-present*** helping us to ***“be here now”.***

<u>Song for Autumn</u>

In the deep fall
  don’t you imagine the leaves think how
comfortable it will be to touch
  the earth instead of the
nothingness of air and the endless
  freshets of wind? And don’t you think
the trees themselves, especially those with mossy,
  warm caves, begin to think

of the birds that will come – six, a dozen – to sleep
  inside their bodies? And don’t you hear

the goldenrod whispering goodbye,
   the everlasting being crowned with the first
tuffets of snow? The pond
   vanishes, and the white field over which
the fox runs so quickly brings out
   its blue shadows. And the wind pumps its
bellows. And at evening especially,
   the piled firewood shifts a little,
longing to be on its way. [16]



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"Words for Autumn Poems or Stories" at **CUMULOQUOISE BLOG** (12 October 20140 available here, accessed September 7, 2022.

End Notes

1. All of these equinoctial factoids are courtesy of **timeanddate.com**, which can be found here, accessed September 7, 2022.
2. Shakespeare, William. *"Sonnet 18"* in Helen Vendler, ***The Art of Shakespeare's Sonnets.*** (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1997), p. 120.
3. Ibid., *"Sonnet 73",* p. 333.
4. Tearle, Oliver, *"Ten Classic Autumn Poems Everyone Should Read"* at **InterestingLiterature.com** available here, accessed September 7, 2022.
5. Keats, John. *"Letter to John Hamilton Reynolds",* quoted in ***The Complete Poems and Selected Letters,*** Ed. Clarence DeWitt Thorpe. (New York: The Odyssey Press, 1935), p. 377.
6. Ibid., pp. 376-378.
7. The Shaw quote above, these brief comments and the direct quotation immediately preceding the note are drawn from *"Coole Park Nature Reserve"* at **Coole Park Ireland** available here, accessed September 8, 2022.
8. Yeats, William Butler. *"The Wild Swans at Coole"* in ***W.B. Yeats: The Poems.*** (London: Everyman's Library, 1992), pp. 180-181.
9. Shuck, Kim, Jaya Eagle Heart Opela and Suzanne Astar, *"How to Celebrate the Harvest Moon"* in **The Farmer's Almanac** available here. Accessed September 8, 2022.
10. Ibid.
11. Sandburg, Carl. *"Under the Harvest Moon"* at **The American Academy of Poets** available here, accessed September 8, 2022.
12. Young, Neil. *"Harvest Moon"* at **LyricFind** available here, accessed September 8, 2022.

13. Stevenson, Robert Louis, *"Autumn Fires"* at **All Poetry** available here, accessed September 8, 2022.
14. *"Autumn."* At **Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary**, **Merriam-Webster**, available at https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/autumn acccessed 8 Sep. 2022.
15. Gilbert, Jack. *"After Love",* in **Collected Poems.** (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012), p. 316.
16. Oliver, Mary, *"Song for Autumn"* in **Devotions: The Selected Poems of Mary Oliver**. (New York: Penguin Press, 2017), p. 152.

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