

KEEPING GOOD COMPANY

James Agee: Selected Poems. American Poets Project, The Library of America, 2008. *Anne Stevenson: Selected Poems.* American Poets Project, The Library of America, 2008.

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Virtually unanimous praise has been lavished on the Library of America's definitive editions of our national literature. Less has been said about the same publisher's American Poets Project, a series of compact editions of American poetry, selected and introduced by distinguished poets and scholars. Beyond the few "category" anthologies (*Poets of World War II*, *American Wits*, *Poets of the Civil War*, *American Sonnets*), the poets in the series range from the marginal and neglected (Yvor Winters, Kenneth Fearing, Louis Zukofsky) to the popular, but academically slighted (Edna St. Vincent Millay, John Greenleaf Whittier, Carl Sandburg, even Cole Porter), to those who should be, but have not yet been, honored with complete editions (William Carlos Williams, John Berryman, Theodore Roethke, Gwendolyn Brooks), to those recently deceased contemporaries making an early bid for some kind of canonical recognition (Muriel Rukeyser, A. R. Ammons, Kenneth Koch)—the series attempts to fill a huge void between those poets unfairly left on the shores of oblivion and those already enshrined on the peaks of Parnassus. Given the vast sea of neglected poetry around us, the only puzzling choices seem to be those poets like Whitman and Poe, who are already represented by fuller Library collections.

The most recent volumes in this series *James Agee*, edited by Andrew Hudgins, and *Anne Stevenson*, edited by Andrew Motion, (Volumes 26 and 27 respectively) assume very different positions in the Project's growing constellation. James Agee, legendary for his personal charisma and his eclectic literary passions, joins Edith Wharton on the list as a famous writer of prose whose poetry is here being re-presented (Agee's major prose, like Wharton's, is collected in a Library edition). The much less known American-British writer Anne Stevenson, on the other hand, distinguishes herself as the only living poet yet to be featured in the Poet's Project (John Ashbery is represented in the Library). Stevenson is a recipient of the Neglected Masters Award, established by the Poetry Foundation, and this volume is published in conjunction with that award. Furthermore, a good bit of the Agee volume is a reprinting of *Permit Me Voyage*, which won the Yale Younger Poets award in 1934 when Agee was just 24, and shows his overall

poetry *oeuvre* to be thin, while Stevenson's volume is a selection, culled from a richer source of a dozen volumes from a poetry career spanning almost 50 years. It would be silly to catalogue invidious comparisons between the two. Beyond the flashes that reveal the seeds of a wild and profligate talent—and clues to his personal conflicts, if not demons—Agee's poetry confirms that his essential literary reputation rests with his prose; Stevenson's selection, on the other hand, makes a claim to be read with the same attention accorded to influential poets like Sylvia Plath and Elizabeth Bishop, who are subjects of Stevenson's nonfiction, a biography and a book of criticism, respectively.

A character in T.S. Eliot's *The Cocktail Party*, with a dry insouciance typical of his leisured aristocratic milieu, delivers the following line:

Yes, I've seen her poetry—
 Interesting if one is interested in Celia.
 Apart, of course, from its literary merit
 Which I don't pretend to judge.

To adapt Eliot's character's quip to James Agee: many readers might be drawn to this volume of poetry if they are already interested in his nonfiction, fiction, and screenplays.

In fact, Agee's poetry might be evaluated much like the early poetry of James Joyce: regardless of its literary merit, it is interesting and valuable for the light it brings to the later prose. Since he wrote increasingly fewer poems in his short, tempestuous adult life—restlessly veering from the *sui generis* accomplishment of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, to groundbreaking film criticism, to brilliant screenplays like *The African Queen*, to his moving fiction, including the posthumous (and recently re-edited) *A Death in the Family*—some might be tempted to dismiss the early poetry as juvenilia, or, as in Faulkner's sly deprecation of his own youthful poetry, a noble failure, on the way to manifesting his *métier* as a great prose artist. But, as in Joyce and Faulkner, it is the lyrical quality of all Agee's writing, his care and consciousness of language itself, that gives currency and power to his literary achievements as a whole.

In his introduction to his edition of the Agee volume, Andrew Hudgins makes the strongest case for the achievement of his poetry in Agee's sequence of 25 Shakespearian sonnets in *Permit Me Voyage*. Suffused with the vestiges of Agee's devout boyhood Anglo-Catholicism, radically tempered by his coming of age in the Depression and his early reading of Marx, and echoing Christian poetry from the King James Bible to Donne and Eliot, these sonnets begin with the death of the first Adam, but instead of appealing to the consolations of Christian salvation, they follow the conflicts of

Adam's descendants as they struggle between physical hunger and hunger for divine purpose: in Hudgin's pithy formulation, "History works itself out as theological fate." The second sonnet begins,

Our doom is our being. We began
 In hunger eager more than ache of hell:
 And in that hunger became each a man
 Ravened with hunger death alone may spell (II)

This passage alone makes clear why Hudgins finds in Agee's poetry a world-view "as bleak as anything that John Calvin ever formulated." As much for his own physical hungers—in his brief life of 45 years, Agee's drinking, smoking, and sexual careering were legendary—as for his ultimate appeal to a Christian God for understanding, the heart and anxiety of his poetry reminds me of certain lyrics in John Berryman's *Dream Songs*, where of Henry, he writes, "Hunger was constitutional with him, / women, cigarettes, liquor, need need need / until he went to pieces. / The pieces sat up and wrote" ("311"). As in Berryman, Agee's moral judgments about instinctual transgressions may be rationalized in the light of civilization and its discontents, but the poet's ultimate concerns are religious—with guilt, sin, and redemption—even if his explorations are conceptually limited by an all too human language:

I have known love as lowly, full of lust,
 Bent on contriving Godhead from the flesh,
 Wrought from desire and waning through mistrust,
 Starved in the sinuately carnal mesh.
 Is there indeed a God who can redeem
 The love we know as a dawn-tinctured dream. (Sonnet XII)

As much as I admire Agee for his moral passions and the achievements of his brief, brilliant literary career, I think Hudgins overstates the case for Agee as a lyric poet. Yes, he delivers intermittently the Romantic pleasures of the glittering fragment, but even the above passage reveals a tendency toward strained diction ("sinuately"?), the reliance on abstract terminology, and—rather than subtle and creative adaptations of his nativist Tennessee sermons—a tone too highly arched, sometimes even a bit bombastic. Toward the end of his sonnet sequence, even when he personalizes the burdens of history and human failing, his sonnets lack the particular intimate drama and urgency of Shakespeare's sequence. Or, to use a fairer comparison, though Agee does sometimes successfully link particular emotional or psychological conflicts to the universals of moral allegory, his sonnets lack

the seering immediacy of Berryman's sonnet sequence about an adulterous affair. In short, the limit of these sonnets is located in the exact area where Hudgins finds their strength: even when Agee uses the personal pronoun "I," the speaker seems to be addressing (beyond himself, of course) a congregation from behind a formal, elevated poetry pulpit, rather than to be speaking artfully to another person—whether Shakespeare's Dark Lady or Berryman's mistress—in the earshot of overhearing others.

Those readers like Hudgins who may believe Agee's achievement exists where "the restraints of poetic form become a bulwark against the excesses and narcissism that mar his greatest work in prose," will certainly disagree with my belief that "Dedication"—a Whitmanesque, Blakean blast, part holy manifesto and part oracular howl, written in a rhythmical prose nowhere confined by predetermined form—is the best poem in the book. It is a long litany to his imagined readers, from his beloved inspirers to the venal power-brokers whom he would like to convert:

To Mark Twain; to Walt Whitman; to Ring Lardner; to Hart Crane; to Abraham Lincoln; and to my land and to the squatters upon it and to their ways and words in love; and to my country in indifference.

To the guts and the flexing heart and to the whole body of this language in much love...

To those merchants, dealers and speculators in the wealth of the earth who own this world and its frames of law and government, its channels of advertisement and converse and opinion and its colleges...that they examine curiously, and honestly into their own hearts, and see how surely and to what like extent they are in themselves blood-guilty...and that they repent their very existence as the men they are, and change or quit it: or visit the just curse upon themselves.

In the cataloguing repetitive structures of "Dedication," which takes its place in an incantatory line from the King James Bible to Ginsberg, we recognize sincere moral yearning and moral outrage channeled through its own authentic diction and its own open forms. If you want this naturally expansive, somewhat disheveled poet to give a fiery sermon of poetry, don't box him into 14 lines with regular meter and end rhymes. Let him rip.

I also love the poignant, free-form "Sunday: Outskirts of Knoxville, Tennessee," where the omniscient speaker's concluding prayer that a romantic young couple will in time be blinded to his graphic images of their fall into marital conflict and disillusionments:

Now, on the winsome crumbling shelves she loves of the horror
God show, God blind these children!

His more formal lyrics, however, like “Permit Me Voyage,” an homage to and conversation with Hart Crane, or his sonnets, which echo the Metaphysical poets, Houseman and Auden, among others, show not just the awkward promise of apprenticeship, but their essentially derivative, imitative nature. (In his more narrative poems, one hears Frost’s “Home Burial” in “Ann Garner,” Keats’s “Eve of St. Agnes” in “Epithalamium,” Byron’s “Don Juan” in “John Carter.”) I appreciate Hudgins’ advocacy of a hugely sympathetic, very flawed, courageous, self-destructive, and ultimately great prose writer, who left so many of his ambitions incomplete. Agee’s passionately lyrical, self-conscious prose does not show his missed potential as a poet; rather, this thin volume of poetry shows him finding his voice as a writer of poetic prose.

Anne Stevenson shares with Agee the inheritance of a deep family identification with Protestant Christianity, even if her relationship to that tradition seems more remote and studied. Born in England of American parents and repatriating there after university in the U.S., Stevenson is the author of a dozen books of poetry, as well as criticism and essays, but her work, as her award indicates, has not been widely read, especially on this side of the Atlantic. Perhaps best known as author of the controversial biography *Bitter Fame: A Life of Sylvia Plath*, Stevenson’s reputation (or lack of it) as a poet has suffered predictably for her being neither fully fish nor fowl, American nor English, and surely her preoccupation with the influence of place—more culturally and spiritually, than geographically or nationally defined—reflects her own formative displacements and replacements. This preoccupation is hard to miss, given the titles of early lyrics selected by Andrew Motion, the former Poet Laureate of England: “Living in America,” “Still Life in Utah,” “Ann Arbor,” “Coming Back to Cambridge,” “North Sea Off Carnousie” and so on. Her affinity with Bishop is clear from the opening of an early nature lyric, “Sierra Nevada”:

Landscape without regrets whose weakest junipers
strangle and split granite,
whose hard, clean light is utterly without restraint,
whose mountains can purify and dazzle
and every minute excite us, but never can offer us
commiseration, never can tell us
anything about ourselves except that we are
dispensable...

The careful description of the concrete particular, the humanizing anthropomorphic images of nature, the speaker’s voice, which is both self-effacing

and expressively self-defining, all show a family resemblance with Bishop. Like Bishop, her consciousness is often defined from the outside in, and poems about places, weather, plants, fish, birds, animals insist at once on the primacy and pre-eminence of nature and simultaneously on the value of human consciousness as it defines itself in the act of perception. But, more than the often reticent and cautious Bishop, Stevenson is capable of both philosophically discursive musing as well as emotional, even erotic expansiveness and self-exposure. The conclusion to “Himalayan Balsam,” an effort to descriptively reenact a natural phenomenon, ends in a meditative movement from Wallace Stevens to Molly Bloom:

I could cry to these scent-spilling ragged flowers,
and mean nothing but ‘no’, in that word’s breath,
to their evident going, their important descent through red towering,
stalks to the riverbed. It’s not, as I thought, that death

creates love. More that love knows death. Therefore
tears, therefore poems, therefore long stone sobs of cathedrals
that speak no ferret or fox, that prevent no massacre.
(I am combining abundant leaves from these icy shallows.)

Love, it was you who said, ‘Murder the killer
we have to call life and we’d be a bare planet under a dead sun.’
I loved you with the usual soft lust of October
that says ‘yes’ to the coming winter and a summoning odor of balsam.

No one would ever mistake a voice so embodied and foregrounded for a Bishop poem, and in its centered celebratory self-possession, it is even more distinguished from another important influence, Sylvia Plath. Yet, Plath, who also tried to bridge the cultural divide of the Atlantic along with the daunting chasm of gender politics, also becomes one of Stevenson’s useful repertoire of assimilated voices. When, in her *tour de force* book-length *Correspondences: A Family History in Letters* (1974), she needs to speak in the voice of a desperate young mother, writing to her own mother from a mental institution in a tormented mixture of plea and indictment, echoes of Plath’s “Daddy” are delivered with the ironic distance of dramatic monologue. The section begins,

Mother,

If I am *where* I am
because I am *what* I am
will you forgive me?

God knows I have fought you long enough...
 soft puppet on the knuckles of your conscience, or
 dangling puritanical doll made of duty and habit
 and terror and self-revulsion.
 At what cost
 keeping balanced on invisible threads?
 At what price
 dancing in a sweater set and pearls
 on the stage sets of your expectations?

Its end resembles the signature Plath poem, reminding the reader how closely related the artistic rites of repetition and rhyming are with simple obsession.

Come when you can, or when
 the whitecoats let you.
 But they may not let you, of course.
 They think you're to blame.
 Good God, mother, I'm not insane!
 How can I get out of here?
 Can't you get me out of here?
 I'll try, I'll try, really,
 I'll try again. The marriage.
 The baby. The house. The whole damn bore!

Because for me, what the hell else is there?
 Mother, what more? What more?

I confess to being mostly ignorant of Stevenson's poetry prior to reading this volume, and this long poem, a family saga in verse spanning several generations of an American Protestant family over a century and a half, is impressive in its scope, ambition and achievement. Along with her many short lyrics, *Correspondences* shores up Stevenson's place as a major voice in Anglo-American letters. In her assuming the voices of fictionalized relatives, young and old, male and female, boorish and sophisticated, *Correspondences* not only shows off a deft ventriloquism, but shows through dialogic interrogation how traits and beliefs of the generational past are recast in the present. I am especially taken, for instance, by the way Stevenson imaginatively and convincingly re-inhabits the beliefs of a 19th Century Presbyterian minister dolling out the harsh wisdom of a Puritan faith to his bereaved, recently widowed daughter:

Even presupposing that God has summoned you this sacrifice,
do you deem it in the interest of The Lord to secure your favor?
Is not sacrifice punishment of Sin?

The poem does not merely demonstrate how later generations in their evolution toward a skeptical humanism cope, or fail to cope, emotionally and psychologically with such suffering; she also dramatizes what Weber had argued in his sociological exposition: how the Puritan work ethic was twinned from the beginning with the deforming pressures of capitalism, as are the maxims of one ancestor businessman, written in his journal of 1900:

Work is next to Godliness; a man should keep books
when dealing with the Deity.

The golden Rule of the New Testament is the Golden
Rule of Business.

Religion is the only investment that pays dividends in
the life everlasting.

While Jacob Chandler's unadorned commitment to revealed truths precludes more poetic language, the journal writings of his betrothed daughter, about to bury her erotic imagination beneath moral duty, shows the fading coals of a language shaped by yearning plaintive rhythms,

For now it behooves me to
crush out all personal sorrow,
forsake the whole ground of
self interest, ask not,
"Do I love him?" but affirm!

If I keep every moral commandment,
fulfill every physical requirement,
feed mind into heart,
proffer heart to humanity—
stands it not then to reason
a woman will be happy in her season?

I think not.

It is left to the damaged and rebellious Oedipal descendants of the late 20th Century, Kay and Nick Arbeiter, to reemploy the language for historical self-examination and reconstruction. Grieving his mother's death, a young son poetically indicts the legacy of his Puritan forbearers:

