

The Mr. Siegel Songbook

When it came time to study poetry, Mr. Siegel, my 12th grade English teacher, handed out two poems, one by Gerard Manley Hopkins, and the other, Joyce Kilmer's familiar *Trees*. He asked us to read through the poems, then took a show of hands as to which we thought was the better poem. The entire class preferred *Trees*, with the solitary exception, as I remember, of me. Seeing my hand raised, he asked me for my reasons, but was dissatisfied with every one that I could articulate. When, for instance, I mentioned the simple rhyme scheme, he remarked that Alexander Pope's use of rhymed couplets showed the heights to which such a scheme could ascend. I wasn't sure who Alexander Pope was, but obviously the experience has made his name stick in my head ever since.

Then Mr. Siegel launched into his own misgivings about *Trees*. He went through each couplet, asking us to imagine a tree simultaneously performing each symbolic act, and laughing, in his gentle way, at the resulting mishmash. Turning to the Hopkins, he deciphered the poet's passionately convoluted language for us. By the end of the period, yielding to persuasion and force of will, the whole class raised their hands to declare Gerard Manley Hopkins the superior poet, to the obvious satisfaction of Mr. Siegel, who, as you may have guessed, was a devoted Hopkins lover. I took a number of lessons away from that day.

The poems in this piece are among those we studied in that class. They reflect, I imagine, Mr. Siegel's personal taste. I have thought for a long time about setting some of them to music.



Only after I had written the piece did I discover another thread of connection between the poems: the First World War. Kilmer was killed in that brutal conflict, and the other poems were all published within a year of his death (even though Hopkins had written his poetry years earlier).

To me, *Trees* symbolizes an age of innocence. Kilmer's early death is the loss of that innocence. And the other poems are various ways of responding to the loss, as poets strove for new ways to make sense of a changing world, and the public unearthed forgotten eccentrics whose sensibilities suddenly seemed in tune with the times.



Joyce Kilmer, the youngest of the poets, was born in 1886, and grew up in New Jersey. Kilmer and his wife turned to their religious faith when their daughter Rose was stricken with infantile paralysis. He wrote, "When faith did come, it came, I think, by way of my little paralyzed daughter. Her lifeless hands led me; I think her tiny feet know beautiful paths." Kilmer was a popular public lecturer, and *Trees*, written in 1913, was an immediate success.

When the United States entered World War I, Kilmer volunteered for the army, where he displayed conspicuous bravery. He loved the excitement and danger of soldiering, and asked for the riskiest assignments. He was killed by a sniper at the Second Battle of the Marne in 1918, at the age of 32, leaving behind a wife and four children.



The Irish poet and playwright William Butler Yeats was a leading light in the Irish Literary Revival. He wrote *The Cat and the Moon* in 1919. By that time he was 54; not only had the world changed, but Yeats himself had changed as well, moving away from his youthful romanticism. *The Cat and the Moon* explores the mystical connection between Minnaloushe, the cat, and his heavenly counterpart, the moon.

Maud Gonne, who turned down Yeats' marriage proposals on four separate occasions, had a cat named Minnaloushe. And as it so happens, my sister Diane also has a cat named Minnaloushe.



The collected poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins were published in 1918. Hopkins himself had passed away 30 years before. An English Jesuit priest, Hopkins had a conflicted, unhappy relationship with his poetry; he burned his early works upon entering the priesthood. Only through the efforts of friends were his poems brought to public attention after his death. The delay may have been just as well, since his poetry was odd for its time, and probably found a more receptive audience in 1918 than it would have fifty years before.

Hopkins loved words. The reader can't help but feel that some words were chosen as much for how they sounded as for what they meant. Hopkins dredged up archaic, obscure words, and invented new ones. Rhymes and alliterations pop up everywhere in his poems.

In *Pied Beauty*, the multicolored, diverse world of words is matched by the multicolored, diverse world of nature: birds, fish, flames, and spotted cows. Hopkins praises everything from the sublime to the ridiculous, for how each thing flashes its own special beauty, at the same time reflecting the inventiveness and beauty of the God who created them.



Yeats published *The Second Coming* in 1919, the same year as *The Cat and the Moon*. It is first and foremost a political poem, concerned with the disintegration of the old world order and its replacement by a new, brutal one. The events of the time -- World War I, the Russian Revolution, the rise of Fascism, World War II -- were certainly apocalyptic in sweep, and later in life Yeats claimed that he saw it all coming in this poem. Yeats was sympathetic to the ruling classes, and

the poem echoes the dire predictions of aristocratic thinkers since the time of Plato that, once anarchy has swept away traditional, legitimate rule, the result will be the illegitimate and direct rule of raw power.

Whether or not we agree with Yeats, or with his drastic vision of the Christian era giving way to the age of the beast of the desert, we should recognize the importance of his point. In unjust times, we are tempted to hope for a day of judgment when, we fondly imagine, the unjust will receive their comeuppance. “Surely,” we say, “some revelation is at hand.” But Yeats reminds us that the apocalypse is never an event to be anticipated, but one to be dreaded.



Wallace Stevens was an insurance company executive in Hartford, Connecticut, whose poetic career began in middle age. *Anecdote of the Jar*, one of his first published works, appeared in 1919, when he was 40. Like Hopkins, his fame grew after his death, and Stevens is now considered one of the most important American poets of the 20th century.

Stevens was concerned with the relationship between reality and imagination. For Stevens, this relationship was complicated. Quoting Wikipedia: “Reality is the product of the imagination as it shapes the world. Because it is constantly changing as we attempt to find imaginatively satisfying ways to perceive the world, reality is an activity, not a static object.... To make sense of the world is to construct a worldview through an active exercise of the imagination.”

In *Anecdote of the Jar*, the primal Tennessee wilderness is interrupted by the intrusion of the Jar, which imposes a point of reference, bringing order to the wilderness. Before, there were endless hills, valleys, and woods. Now there is the hill where the Jar sits, and the rest of the wilderness surrounds that hill, subservient to it. But nothing has actually changed except our perspective.

Last week, while riding the New York subway, I got so wrapped up in the poem’s lofty thoughts of how perspective creates reality that I forgot at which stop I was supposed to get off, and had to walk farther than I needed to to get where I was going. Perhaps there’s a lesson there. But it was a pleasant walk nonetheless. Stevens was a great lover of long walks.



Both *The Second Coming* and *The Windhover* begin with a falcon in free flight. But where Yeats saw this freedom negatively, as a path to anarchy, Hopkins’ falcon is a symbol of liberation. He marvels at its confidence and mastery of the skies.

Hopkins proclaims that we, too, can share in that mastery and freedom. He invites us to “buckle on” the pride and plume of the falcon, even as we surpass it in beauty and power through our humanity. We can find this beauty, he says, even in everyday life.

The subtitle of the poem, “To Christ Our Lord”, suggests that the falcon is also a symbol of Christ, and His power and mastery. The natural world and the spiritual example of Christ both serve as models for how we can live freely and confidently as we go about our humble business.

And in case you were wondering, “sillion” means the earth turned over in the furrow as the plow moves along.