

THOUGHTS ON LAWYERS AND POETRY

By Jay M. Starr

Rationalists, wearing square hats
Think, in square rooms,
Looking at the floor,
Looking at the ceiling.
They confine themselves
To right-angled triangles.
If they tried rhomboids,
Cones, waving lines, ellipses--
As, for example, the ellipse of the half-moon--
Rationalists would wear sombreros.

Those lines are the last canto of a poem called, "Six Significant Landscapes." They were written by a staid New England lawyer who specialized in construction bonds at the old Hartford Accident and Indemnity Company. His secretary typed his poems as he dictated them. He lived all his working life Hartford, Conn., my hometown.

In a long time, he lived across the street from a wonderful park, took his daughter skating on the park's pond in winter and walked with his wife in its rose garden when it was in bloom. He hunted and fished in Florida with his pals. He lived a long, respectable and respected life. He lived, worked and raised his family without glory, tragedy, catastrophe or a defining event.

But he managed to win a Bollingen Prize, two National Book Awards and a Pulitzer Prize and was arguably the best American poet of the 20th century (with all respect to T.S. Eliot, who arguably is more influential and famous but didn't live or write in America). His name is Wallace Stevens.

There is no compelling explanation for the weight of his poetry or any window into the inner life of the mind that could produce it. We can't even guess. Charles Reznikoff, another American poet with a law degree (he practiced very briefly), liked to cite the Tung Dynasty poet, Wei-Ta'i, that "Poetry presents the thing in order to convey the feeling. It should be precise about the thing and reticent about the feeling." The thought seems right when scanning the compressed beauty of the last lines of Wallace's second canto.

A pool shines,
Like a bracelet
Shaken in a dance.

In the sixth canto, Stevens addresses the limits of linear reasoning and the self-imposed boundaries of rational thought that presumably resolve into predictability and therefore the presumption of some control of things. The contrast between the precision of right angles and the more problematic, more mysterious oscillations of waves and curves speaks to the contrast between straight-line thinking and the less immediately accessible, idiosyncratic processes that are the heart of human creativity. What's implicit in the last four lines of the poem is that the way to see things differently, more creatively, is to let go.

Lionel Trilling, the quintessential literary critic who championed closely reasoned textual analysis, never wrote a good novel. He knew why, and it tortured him. In a 1933 entry in his diary, Trilling describes a letter he's read from Hemingway to Clifton Fadiman, a now forgotten man of letters in his day, when America still had men of letters. "A crazy letter," Trilling writes, "written when he was drunk." Then Trilling confesses the point that haunts him: "his (Hemingway's) life which he could expose without dignity... is a better life than anyone I know could live...".

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Adam Phillips, arguably the most literary of Freudians extant, says of Trilling, “Dignity is a form of self-possession; he [is] too self-possessed to be otherwise possessed.” Trilling, that is, is too dedicated to the project of constructing a respectable, respected rational life to be like Hemingway: “self-revealing, arrogant, scared, trivial, absurd...”. The same could be said of most of us lawyers.

The price paid by Trilling was terribly expensive psychically. His dedication to being both respected and respectable hid a gnawing secret unhappiness with his own rectitude and the recognition that he was inherently powerless to do or be anything else. It’s a great mystery how Stevens, the workaday lawyer drafting his bonds, pulled off both bourgeois respectability and his unique, powerful creative poetic anarchy.

So, what do Wallace Steven’s poetry and Lionel Trilling’s anxieties have to do with us lawyers? Only this: we’re trained to be logical, rigorously so, and often enough we mistake

logic for reason, which can lead us to some unhappy results. With the passing of years, it’s come to seem more important, though not always strictly logical, to consider the wider world when advising a client. It’s not just the logic of the law, but the causes and consequences of action and its ripples in the larger web of our social relations that perhaps should rightly be considered more than we do. It’s not always what the client hopes, it’s certainly not the no-holds-barred aggressiveness that many clients expect, but it may well be the better way.

Still, I’d rather not go to a meeting wearing a sombrero. Then again, there are lots of days when I’d rather read Wallace Steven’s poetry than go to a meeting with or without a sombrero. If more of us wrote poetry more often, I think the world would be in better shape, even if that’s an idea not quite respectable. ■

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