

## "Nature in Some of Stanley Kunitz's Poems"

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### **Abstract**

*This paper will deal with the employment of 'nature' in some selected poems written by the modern American poet Stanley Kunitz throughout his long life. The paper will review first the diverse old and modern approaches in which poets utilize and treat nature in their poetry. Although Stanley Kunitz was not a nature poet per se, but through his search for identity, he elaborated an intense mystical connection with the natural world that helped him find his true voice and poetic self. His lifelong fascination with gardening and the natural world instigated not only the rejuvenation of his spirit, but motivated, as well, one of the most unique themes of his poetry; that of the ritualistic process of "death and resurrection".*

### **1. Introduction**

For a variety of reasons, nature was and still is handled by poets in either a conventional or an inventive manner. It could be employed for the emotional connections poets feel for nature, for the sheer pleasure and enjoyment they get from nature's plain beauty, or even in favour of the moral, intellectual and spiritual manifestations it could afford. Nature could bring to the memory the childhood innocent recollections and stir the hoards of some precious metaphorical implications that poets prize and nature may provide. Nature may possibly correspond to the landscape of the elaborate human emotions or actions dealt with in a poem. In addition to its vital role as a means of communicating thoughts, expressing feelings, or just passing information, nature might sometimes motivate poets to explore some philosophical issues. By juxtaposing it to the human predicaments, poets could maintain sympathy or contrast to man's inner conflicts and human concerns. Poets may, as well, utilize nature not only as a source of tranquility, but also as an indifferent or agonistic destructive force in man's life. Finally, it could be the main topic of the poem; not just a setting or background to human concerns and interests.

Some of these approaches are old and traditional, while others are modern and original. Stanley Kunitz was definitely of the modern party who celebrated nature and adored the natural world, although was not exclusively a nature poet. His poems, whether written during his early or late period, were frequently populated with trees, animals and landscapes, and his long-life enthusiasm for gardening witnesses for his passion for nature.

**Keywords:** Nature as a dynamic living entity, use of nature imagery to discuss the human self, personal identity, memory, change, loss, life and death cycle and rejuvenation.

### **2. Stanley Kunitz's Poetry**

Throughout his long life, Ted Rosenberg Stanley Kunitz (1905-2006) wrote many poems and won recognition; officially and publically. Experiencing the senses of loss, alienation, change and death early in life, made such events the focal points in his poems. His father's suicide before his birth, and his stepfather's death when he was only 14, devastated Kunitz's life and shaped his early poetry. However, Kunitz was never a confessional poet; he resented labeling him thus and commented that his "concept was to transform the events of his [my] life into legend" (Dana Goodyear, 2003). He simply believed that poems "bear the stamp of their origins and are inseparable from them" (Goodyear, 2003). In his "Hornworm: Autumn Lamentation", he declares bitterly:

Since that first morning when I crawled  
 into the world, a naked grubby thing,  
 and found the world unkind,  
 my dearest faith has been that this  
 is but a trial: I shall be changed.

(L1.1-5)

During the early stage of his poetic writings, specifically in *Intellectual Things* (1930) and *Passport to the War* (1944), Kunitz was preoccupied with themes of love, human spirit, the limitations of the human reason, the search for identity and death. Later on, 'change' and 'growth' became the keynotes in Kunitz's life and poetry. In his late poetry, a lively atmosphere that depicts the shift in his view of life, in the world and in his poetic voice, replaced the early reactions, and they were frequently motivated by memories of his own life. Though some of those late poems still sounded depressed in tone, yet, they definitely suggested a sort of philosophical hopefulness. This shift was accompanied by the stylistic modification of sacrificing the superficial devices and the condensed style for the sake of a real relaxed lyrical individuality. His early intellectual, complex, dense, and abstract metaphysical poetry was replaced by intimate, self-revealing, more lucid, raw -to use Robert Lowell's expression- (John Crick, 1974, p.136) , transparent, simpler, freer, more accessible, shorter in lines and sometimes even visionary poems. Such divergences from traditional meters served Kunitz well. He commented on this shift saying that his early poems:

Were very intricate, dense and formal....They were written in conventional metrics and a very strong beat to the line....In my later poems I've learned to depend on a simplicity that seems almost nonpoetic on the surface, but has reverberations within, that keep it intense and alive (The Poetry Foundation, Stanley Kunitz © 2013)

Despite this departure from his early highly rhetorical poetry, the stylistic change retained the same themes and represented a development and a revitalization of his prospective; rather than a rejection or a break with his old themes. As for his approach to nature, he maintained the same old stand towards it; because nature kept providing him with the same excitement.

It is worth mentioning that Kunitz did not exactly adopt the Romantic worship of nature as mother and guide, neither did his poetry reflect the modern "mindlessness of nature" or "its nonhuman otherness" (Michael Webster, 2000, p.102). Kunitz's relation to nature is exactly what Ruskin has described when he said the "writer could not look at nature in and of itself, but must attribute some human emotion to it" (Webster, 2000, p.102).

### 3. Kunitz's Relationship with Nature

Kunitz spent his life between his birthplace in Worcester/ New York in winter, and Provincetown on Cape Cod, in summer (Robert Campbell, 2000). However, his summer residence in Provincetown, which he bought in 1962, had a unique impact on his life and poetry; because he created there an incredible 2,000 square –foot garden, which he considered one of his life's proudest achievements. His idea of the beautiful life became that of writing poetry and thinking about his garden (Goodyear, 2003). The city for him became synonymous to a rural exile, while Provincetown garden turned into a life passion that insinuated itself in his most influential work *The Wild Braid* (2005). He regarded working his hands into the soil of that garden an art that not only lifted his soul, but turned life's tediousness into an exceptional experience (Encyclopedia of World Biography, 2004). In an interview with Chris Busa, Kunitz affirmed that he was "never very far from the creature world. Some of his (my) deepest feelings have to do with plants and animals" (Chris Busa, Interview, Stanley Kunitz, © 2013).

As a microcosm of nature, that garden was connected in kunitz's mind with poetry -that is rooted in the natural world. He believed earnestly that "The prevailing concept of the garden is that each tier constitutes a stanza"(Goodyear, 2003) Consequently, he perceived "The seasonal evolution" of the garden as a manifestation of the theme of "death and resurrection", observing that "The garden is in bloom until the killing frost. The tiers advance—the late garden is on the upper tiers. It keeps renewing itself "(Goodyear, 2003). Answering a question asked by Mark Katzman, on "What does one learn working in a garden?" Kunitz replied that it taught him "Patience above all, patience. And beyond patience one learns to appreciate the beauty of ordinary things in this earth and the magic of growth and survival." (Mark Katzman, Interview, 2003).

When he was a child and through his formative years, Kunitz found refuge in the natural world; as he validates in *The Testing Tree*, 1971 and in *The Wild Braid*. Kunitz relates in *The Wild Braid* the story of his taming a family of owls that within few weeks began to fly and land on his outstretched arm. He moved the owls then into his attic so that they could come and go freely through its open window. He commented on this incident saying: "My encounter with this family of owls was one of the most intimate of all my experiences with the animal world, a world I consider to be part of our own world, too (Goodyear, 2003).

The images he employed in his poetry- and acted as key to his adult life - were usually associated with crucial experiences of his childhood while roaming the woods in that natural habitat. However, we have to bear in mind that Kunitz's natural subjects and elements were rather familiar and not exotic, and were presented in a visual format without any overt psychological analysis.

Each of the following poems contends with the theme of nature, and frequently handles loneliness; which could have its essence in his childhood memories and the sense of isolation Kunitz struggled with, due to the early absence of a father's figure in his life. Some of the most invigorating of his childhood memories revealed in his poems were associated with the natural world.

### 3.1 "The War Against Trees"

This poem was included in Stanley Kunitz's third volume of poetry *Selected Poems, 1928-1958* that won the 1959 Pulitzer Prize. The poem warns that our earth is threatened by a tragic change. The poem is an evidence not just of Kunitz's deep sympathy with nature and the environmental issues, but for his profound grieve over the loss of a beautiful natural heritage, and the absence of human concern for the shrine of culture and civilization; earth:

The man who sold his lawn to standard oil  
 Joked with his neighbors come to watch the show  
 While the bulldozers, drunk with gasoline,  
 Tested the virtue of the soil  
 Under the branchy sky  
 By overthrowing first the privet-row.  
 Forsythia-forays and hydrangea-raids  
 Were but preliminaries to a war  
 Against the great-grandfathers of the town,  
 So freshly lopped and maimed.  
 They struck and struck again,  
 And with each elm a century went down.

(L1.1-12)

Preserving nature has become a joke, and the owner of that lawn seems to have gained good money from selling his land to an oil company; that he considers its ripping a 'show'. The poet personifies the bulldozers as rapists and the trees as royal human gigantic victimized entities; viewing thus the tearing off the land as a criminal act of violating the land's sanctity and raping its trees, and with that assault war begins. Burt Kimmelman affirms: "Kunitz's metaphysical visions of physical nature are often coupled with concrete images and rendered in a declarative, indicative style" (Burt Kimmelman, 2005, p. 267); which is absolutely true.

The crowned giant-trees- are forced finally to their knees, and war concludes with the threat of destroying the natural balance in our world.

This concern with ecology was one of Kunitz's main poetic themes. In his reply to a question by Mark Katzman on the role of poetry in our culture, he affirms:

I think the role of poetry in culture is to make us all aware of the richness of experience itself, of the possibilities of examining, studying, and loving all the bearers of life through all the orders of creation. I believe very strongly in the web of creation. I think we are all part of it and if we disturb it at any one point, the whole web trembles (Mark Katzman, 2003).

### 3.2 "The Testing-Tree"

"The Testing-Tree" is among Kunitz's most celebrated late poems, not only because it signifies his stylistic departure from the early technique, but because it spotlights, as well, his childhood recollections. As a child, he found a haven in the natural world, as he verifies in this poem. The images he employed there were usually associated with some crucial childhood experiences while roaming the woods in that natural habitat. Those manifestations acted later as key to his adult life.

This poem is a natural panorama that bubbles with life, and is inhabited by all forms of nature's living objects. Bees, trees, sugar wells, flowers, deer, rabbits and red foxes all appear in the woods through which the poet was taking a tour:

dawdling riddled with rabbit-life  
 came natural  
 across a nettled field  
 where the bees sank sugar-wells  
 in the trunks of the maples  
 and a stringy old lilac  
 more than two stories tall  
 blazing with mildew  
 remembered a door in the  
 long teeth of the woods.

(Stanza 2, Ll.4 -13)

It is a 'Testing-Tree' because as a child, Kunitz was exclusively seeking out the "inexhaustible oak" to attempt three successful throws to it. However, Kunitz moves swiftly in this poem from the natural to the inner private world. The poem that handles a childhood game in the first two stanzas, changes gears suddenly to the agonizing childhood memories in the last two stanzas. This conveys an awareness of inner desolation that became a characteristic feature of Kunitz's poetry, and offers an insightful approach into human nature. Despite the negative tone to these poems, they are not particularly pessimistic or filled with suffering; for although Kunitz has tolerated throughout his life, he undeniably kept resisting and celebrating life in the face of colossal complexity and wreck.

### 3.3 "The Wellfleet Whale"

Kunitz moves from earth to the sea in this poem, lamenting the destruction of another member of nature's kingdom. This poem was also included in Stanley Kunitz's lifetime's work *Selected Poems, 1928-1958*. The poem opens with the whales' desperate sound and shares with the readers the account of the beaching and tragic death of a whale on Cape Cod. The mob at Wellfleet on Cape Cod tortures this symbolic creature by carving, insensitively, initials on its flesh until it dies. Kunitz identifies with the whale and seems to mourn for both the animal and himself, until the gap between the poet and the natural object diminishes. Through this identification with nature, the poet in fact was preserving his soul and identity. Kunitz himself remarked in an interview with Gary Pacernick that he felt as being "part of the civilization of the whale" (Gary Pacernick, 1997):

Toward dawn we shared with you  
 your hour of desolation,  
 the huge lingering passion  
 of your unearthly outcry.

(Ll.94-97)

Even the elegiac musical language of the whale matches that of a poet:

You have your language too,  
 an eerie medley of clicks  
 and hoots and trills,  
 location-notes and love calls.

(Ll.1-4)

In his article "God, Man and Whale", Robert Campbell notices a resemblance between the tree -in "The Testing Tree"- in which Kunitz carves his initials, and the whale in this poem. Abuse turns both into Christ-like figures and into archetypal symbols of martyrdom. Campbell continues describing Kunitz as "an avowed Jungian" and quotes him as writing:

The imagination is a deep-sea diver that rakes the bottom of the poet's mind and dredges up sleeping images. ... and if we go deep enough, we may discover the secret place where our key images have been stored since childhood.

He believes poems exist before you know them, "Even before it is ready to change into language, a poem may begin to assert its buried life in the mind with wordless surges of rhythm and counter rhythm" (Campbell, 2000).

Deep inside his unconscious self, Kunitz will keep digging, to realize that he will find and employ precisely these same symbols and themes in different contexts.

### **3.4 "Comet Haley"**

This poem strikes the reader with its powerful evocation of childhood memories of the outer space, which were connected with the natural phenomenon of Comet Haley going off track and smashing into earth:

Miss Murphy in first grade  
wrote its name in chalk  
across the board and told us  
it was roaring down the storm tracks  
of the Milky Way at frightful speed  
and if it wandered off its course  
and smashed into the earth  
there'd be no school tomorrow.

(L1.1-8)

This poem is clearly an attempt to reawaken the state of childhood innocence. It is written from the perspective of the older Kunitz who has lost his innocence and is considering now what adults proclaim. Revisiting this first stage childhood experience during old age, appraises, among other things, the concepts of change and movement. Time, circumstances and life as we know it on earth, are about to change. The little Kunitz moves restlessly from school to home and from one room to the other until he climbs to the roof where he concludes the poem with the incredibly beautiful naive prayer:

Look for me, Father, on the roof  
of the red brick building  
at the foot of Green Street -  
that's where we live, you know, on the top floor.  
I'm the boy in the white flannel gown  
sprawled on this coarse gravel bed  
searching the starry sky,  
waiting for the world to end.

(L1. 30-37)

Just as Kunitz has declared once that poetry is "the cry and the song of the human spirit through the centuries and no art has been so expressive of it as poetry (Katzman , 2003), this poem conveys all the agony that the poet's spirit has endured as a child. It is a blessing that such a soul did not hold a grudge against life; but accepted birth and death as natural episodes, and continued to lead the reader skillfully throughout such amazing poems as "Comet Haley", without patronizing.

## **4. Kunitz and Human Nature**

The fascinating land curves, the captivating sea and the enchanting sky of Provincetown, not only appealed to Kunitz as an ideal setting and original notion, but furnished him with another of his great pronouncements; the idea that 'nature' could allude as well to the nature of people who enticed him (Goodyear, 2003). This could even work as another variation on the themes of life and death, and "death and resurrection".

Poets have constantly perceived nature as a reflection of the human life and experience. Nature has its four seasons; a sequence of living, dying, and renewal, and each of these phases has its distinctive personality; just like humans. Many myths ascribe the death of winter and the rebirth of spring to the death and rebirth of a god with human traits, who in some ancient traditions is a man ritually murdered and in others a figurine buried or thrown into the sea to guarantee fertility or to bring rain.

In Kunitz's case, outer nature helped him to attain a meaningful insight into the depths of the human condition. The 'natural' for him did not include only the wild life or the natural scenery; but human nature as well. He affirmed that:

The circumstances of my early years made me receptive of any student who came to me and who was exploring not only the self but the society as a whole, the natural world as well as the human world...And I am not implying that the human world is not natural (Goodyear, 2003).

Although nature is not the subject for direct treatment in Poems like "The Layers", "Touch Me" and "Single Vision", yet, Kunitz utilizes nature's images to objectify his inner life and major concerns such as self, family, love, loneliness, life and death in these poems.

#### 4.1 "The Layers"

The poem obviously presents Kunitz's favourite themes of change, loss and the transitory nature of life; of which he had firsthand experience. "The Layers" is truly "a poem that offers realistic optimism despite its sad and fatalistic tone" (The Layers - Research Assistance). The grieving tone of "How shall the heart be reconciled / to its feast of losses?" (L 1.20-21), and of:

Oh, I have made myself a tribe  
out of my true affections,  
and my tribe is scattered!

(L1.17-19)

turns into embracing whatever milestones Kunitz may have left, and overcoming the sorrow over loss and human mortality. The solution comes from "a nimbus-clouded voice" that directs him to:

"Live in the layers,  
not on the litter."  
Though I lack the art  
to decipher it,  
no doubt the next chapter  
in my book of transformations  
is already written.  
I am not done with my changes.

(L1.37-44)

The poem is definitely not about death; but a marvelous expression of encountering, then rising above life's most devastating experiences of loss and death. Kunitz admitted openly in his later poems that his own early experiences in life were shocking, and that he felt the world "unresponsive and neglectful and ...above all I felt was alienated from the aspirations of the young and paid little attention to them" (Katzman, 2003). However, here is a human being who has come into good terms with life despite its difficulties, and who has adopted a belief in change that enabled him to be more responsive, caring and sympathetic at heart, mind and soul.

#### 4.2 "Touch Me"

It echoes the previous poem in exploring the transitory and constantly changing nature of human life. The old Kunitz looks back and puts a lifetime in perspective:

Summer is late, my heart  
Words plucked out of the air  
some forty years ago  
when I was wild with love.

(L1.1-4)

Answering the question of "How does one face death, and can poetry help?" Kunitz says:

One lives and dies simultaneously. It happens bit by bit, every day. I have tried to report that dialogue.... I am less fearful of death in my nineties than I was in my teens, for the natural cycle has its own reasons, even its own dark beauty. I consider myself lucky to have been given this life (Pacernick, 1997).

Having such positive feelings towards life and death at his nineties, had everything to do with his deep conviction of the transitory nature of all living creatures. Despite being "torn almost in two/ and scatter like leaves this night"(Ll.5-6), he tolerated life and all mortal fears because 'desire' uplifted his soul:

Desire, desire, desire.

The longing for the dance  
stirs in the buried life.

One season only,  
and it's done.

So let the battered old willow  
thrash against the windowpanes  
and the house timbers creak.

Darling, do you remember  
the man you married? Touch me,  
remind me who I am .

(Ll.7-17)

The heartbreaking end reminds us to contemplate on our lives, and embrace the poet's same memorable moment of surrender in search of identity, but never of self- pity.

## **5. Conclusion**

The modern American poet Stanley Kunitz did not represent any movement, and his work was not fully loaded with allusions or emblems; but he used to associate and layer ideas, images and language from all over the 'natural world' for their metaphorical value and the joy they afford. As a child, Kunitz found refuge in the natural world that fascinated him, as he ascertains in his later poetry. Nature, thus, became a powerful force in his life and an endless treasury of symbolism and allegory that inspired him.

By exposing his ideas and feelings by means of using nature, Kunitz did not intend his poems to be interpreted as records of the modern crisis or to become personifications of modernist poems. He was just trying to attain a sense of direction in order to improve his life. He used 'nature' images, specifically in his later poetry, to depict not only the major concerns his spirit has tolerated during a century of his remarkable life, but to discuss fundamental issues like nature itself, personal identity, love, memory, life, death and renewal.

The natural world taught him the possibility of renewal, reinvention and resurrection of the self. He realized, and verified in his late poems, his understanding of death as a natural process; an awareness through which he perceived the unity of nature's and man's destiny.

The stunning images of trees, sky, birds, comets, rivers and snakes that vibrantly populate most of his late poems, reflect the natural setting and atmosphere of his summer home at Provincetown; where he felt most contented. Even when the poem's direct topic is not nature; but a romantic personal articulation, Kunitz will never be able to resist the temptation of clutching to nature; at least as a setting.

Kunitz's nature is a great and revered force, almost divine. It is not submissive or passive; but dynamic and unpredictable, just like life. Although birth for Kunitz was connected with death, yet, his 'nature' did not involve an Eliot's April which "is the cruelest month, breeding/Lilacs out of the dead land", neither his cities were Robinson's infertile and drought-stricken metropolitans of "Dead nights". On the contrary, Kunitz responded to nature in harmony with his own personality, celebrating thus, the joy and beauty associated with rebirth following each death. These late poems might be conceived as personal at their immediate level, but a keen reading will guarantee their universal appeal. His images, symbols and meanings drawn from nature, were in no way immature or naive, although generally accessible to his readers.

His keen choice of words, sharp observation, artistry in melding fact and fiction in refreshing images and his sentimental and intellectual vigour have delighted readers for almost 70 years.

Although Kunitz remained obscure to the general public for a long time, especially in our countries, yet, he was considered the most distinguished, profound and accomplished living poet in America during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and was awarded several literary prizes including the Pulitzer in 1959. His book *Passing through: the Later Poems* (1995) won the National Book Award, and in recognition of his excellence, he was appointed America's poet laureate for the years 1974, 1976.

However, since Kunitz was still sustaining his drive at the age of 95, and for his extraordinary longevity, he was chosen for the occupation of poet laureate for a third time in 2000. He was a member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters, the first State Poet of New York in the 1980s and the founder of Provincetown Fine Arts Work Center in 1968.

He exerted a considerable influence on many 20<sup>th</sup> century writers through his incredible poetry and other writings, and many were indebted to him because he helped launch their careers through his work in the Fine Arts Work Center. He was a man who thought, behaved and acted positively, no matter what life threw at him, and gave life more than it gave him.

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