

The Stamp of Class

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Reflections on
Poetry &
Social Class

Gary Lenhart

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To my parents, who provided me with board and plenty of room, tempered my excesses with their love, and continue to serve as models of generosity; and my forbearing daughter and wife, who are my abiding loves and inspiration.

[Edmund] Wilson's article was just half-baked enough to make one warm around the collar. It is so damned easy for such as he, born into easy means, graduated from a fashionable university into a critical chair overlooking Washington Square, etc. to sit tight and hatch little squibs of advice to poets not to be so "professional" as he claims they are, as though all the names he has just mentioned have been as suavely nourished as he—as though 4 out of 5 of them hadn't been damned well forced the major parts of their lives to grub at *any* kind of work they could manage by hook or crook and the fear of hell to secure! Yes, why not step into the State Dept and join the diplomatic corps for a change! indeed, or some other courtly occupation which would bring you into wide and active contact with world affairs! As a matter of fact I'm all too ready to concede that there are several other careers more engaging to follow than that of poetry. But the circumstances of one's birth, the conduct of one's parents, the current economic structure of society and a thousand other factors have as much or more to say about successions to such occupations, the naive volitions of the poet to the contrary.

—Hart Crane

Preface

At the end of eighth grade, the students in my junior high school had to fill out program cards that would determine our high school schedules. We were offered three tracks of study: liberal arts, commercial, or industrial arts. My mother and stepfather knew well what industry was. My mother was widowed at twenty-six when my father jumped from the cab of a ready-mix concrete truck on which the brakes failed. He was killed when the truck veered unpredictably and ended on top of him. Left to raise two small sons (my brother Larry was five, I was six), my mother was fortunate to meet through close neighbors a man who cared for her enough to raise her children as his own. She remarried the following summer.

When my stepfather reacted adversely to the diesel fuel in the Baltimore and Ohio roundhouse and developed skin sores and a painful rash, the railroad's doctors placed a lead mask on his face and irradiated him until whatever was growing on him ceased and desisted, then sent him back to the roundhouse. A few years later, he walked off the Ford assembly line after six months on the job. A quiet man who liked to hunt and fish, he said he just couldn't bear the conditions of factory work. By the time I was in eighth grade, he was employed as a driver for Allied Van Lines, but was only months away from quitting that job too. Despite his complaints, the boss continued to assign a pair of

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mean-tempered brothers as his helpers. A year after my stepfather quit the job, the brothers were arrested and convicted of rape and murder.

Although my mother wanted something better for her boys, she wasn't eager that we have anything to do with art. She encouraged us at math, but didn't see why I would waste an evening drawing butterflies. She wanted me to become a gentleman, which meant white shirt and tie, a steady income, and sufficient reading skills that no one could bamboozle me with a bum contract. She suggested I sign up for the commercial track.

"But Mrs. Grover said I should take liberal arts." (Mrs. Grover was my homeroom and English teacher.)

"Mrs. Grover is *not* your mother."

But Mrs. Grover was alert, and cared enough about the children in her room to intercept my registration card before it was sent to the office, saying, "You're a bright boy. Don't you want to go to college?"

That night, my mother wished to talk to me alone. She told me that I had at that point gone further in school than anyone in the family, so I shouldn't rely any longer on my parents' guidance: "From now on, you will have to make your own decisions."

At thirteen years old, so far as school went I was a free agent. My parents were devout Roman Catholics; we never missed a holy day of obligation. We didn't have to look for jobs; my mother found them for us and told us when we would start. We didn't have to decide what we would do on weekends; like our parents, if we weren't on the job or playing sports, then we were working around the house. But when it came to school, I could travel as far and wide as I pleased.

That first important encounter with freedom always meant a lot to me, but it's only from a distance that I've appreciated the richness of the event. There's the educational tracking that shunts

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most working-class kids toward a predictable future, my mother's desire that her sons move up the social ladder, her willingness to sacrifice proximate gratifications to assure that we did, the collision of values that shifts parental authority to agents of the state, the fear of art as exotic and frivolous, the glimpse of education as liberation—and alienation. My mother was the only girl in a family with five boys. Of the seventeen cousins born to those siblings, my brother and I were the only two to attend college. After graduation, we became the only two to move away—far away. Larry went to Los Angeles and I to New York City, he to a career in banking, and I to become a poet. Had she known how far from home our educations would take us, I sometimes wonder whether my mother would have listened to Mrs. Grover.

My parents encouraged us to attend college, but warned that they could provide nothing in way of support except a room at home and ample meals. We had to pay for our own tuition, and there was enough to cover books but not room and board. I accepted a full scholarship to a small Catholic college nearby. Once there, like a rich man I took only the courses that engaged me, without respect to what I would do after graduation or what I might declare as a major. No one ever asked me why I chose to study English instead of another major that promised more income, or teased that I would end up a high school teacher. We respected and admired high school teachers.

When I accepted a scholarship to pursue graduate study in English literature, my parents never questioned my decision or its practicality. I arrived at the University of Wisconsin's Madison campus in 1969. That year there were protests against the Vietnam War, an occupation of the Wisconsin statehouse by supporters of increased benefits for impoverished families, and a sustained campus strike to support the organizers of a teaching assistants union. When I lost the scholarship during the political turmoil of Cambodian Spring because a conservative professor

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failed me for my participation in the strike, my stepfather only told me that if I was going to carry a picket sign, I should be prepared to use it, and why did I think they put those signs on sticks? After that, I supported my studies by working the night shift at UPS and by washing dishes in a French restaurant. When I left graduate school without a doctorate, my parents weren't disappointed. My mother said they wondered why a twenty-four-year-old man was still in school anyway. Over the next few years, as I devoted myself to poetry, lived in a series of run-down apartments on New York's Lower East Side, and drove cab to pay the rent, my loyal parents defended me to their friends: "He never asks us for a nickel."

After graduating from college I dated a young social worker who generously instructed me in music and art, while smoothing some of my social rough edges. In my life I have been fortunate to meet several women who accepted me as what a basketball coach might call "a project" (i.e., players with "raw" talent who need a lot of work on their game). After twenty years of schooling, I knew how to compose sentences that befitted a graduate student in literature. But I was thirty-two before the woman who became my wife helped me eliminate glaring nonstandard forms of speech that she felt caused people to underestimate my intelligence. It only took about six months of concentrated attention (and my daily exasperation) to eliminate "ain't," for example, from my everyday diction. Soon I was working in publishing and teaching college composition. Though I've taught for the last ten years at Ivy League colleges, the patterns and even the affect of my speech revert to old habits when I spend any time with my family. So much for writing like you talk.

Many years ago Ed Friedman, then director of the Poetry Project at St. Mark's Church in New York City, asked me to organize a panel of poets to talk about poetry and class at the Project's annual symposium. As we mulled over a list of possible

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participants, we would ask each other, what do you suppose his or her class background is? For the most part we couldn't tell. We weren't looking for uniformity, so it didn't matter. Yet, when I phoned one poet and asked her to be on the panel, she responded warily, "How did you know?" She worried that somehow her speech or demeanor gave her away.

That panel—and that phone call—sparked the meditation that became this book. It's subtitled *Reflections on Poetry and Social Class* to indicate that this is not an exhaustive or definitive study of class effects on poetry, but essays about reading poetry with an awareness of class and class-related themes. When I began research on this project, there were few books to guide me. Tillie Olsen's *Silences* provided a direction, as did Janet Zandy's anthology of working-class women's writing. During the ten years that I have been working on this book, much more has been written about what is now called working-class studies. Pioneering scholarly efforts by Zandy, Constance Coiner, Cary Nelson, Alan Wald, and others have focused for the most part on writers other than those I consider here. I hope that *The Stamp of Class* will contribute to the conversation by reading poets who have yet to be examined in this light. I make no broad claims for this book or the poets it considers, many of whom figure marginally in existing histories. I have written about them simply because their poems inspire me, and can easily imagine another book on this topic addressing an entirely different set of poets.

Larry McMurtry's *Walter Benjamin at the Dairy Queen* recounts his love affair with books and reading, and how that pursuit led him beyond Archer City, Texas, to the world of literature. There are other kinds of writers: the novelist Erskine Caldwell liked to brag, "I don't read books, I write 'em." But all the poets discussed here are enthusiastic, if not erudite, readers. The poet Alice Notley once told me that it was difficult for her

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husband, Ted Berrigan, to find books he hadn't already read. Walt Whitman tracked the difference between him and his siblings to the library card he received as a young apprentice, which allowed him to read the novels of that "tory and a high church and state man" Walter Scott several times through. Marcia Nardi never had the means to leave the continental United States, but learned French so she could read Corbière. The thrasher Stephen Duck carried the *Spectator* into his employer's fields to read during breaks.

McMurtry says in his long essay that although he worked for twenty years as a cowboy, the other cowboys knew he was not really a cowboy, but a reader—that is, someone who found pleasure in that act. The poets discussed herein were born to different social stations; as is common in the United States, some rose and fell in status, often several times, during their lives. All were, however, readers. That contributed to the kinds of poems they wrote and complicated their family, peer, class, and artistic identities.

Reading, and reading poems especially, has always been, and remains, a suspect activity in the U.S.A., and not just among the working class. Several journalists and historians have mentioned the paucity of books in the residences of Presidents Reagan and George H. W. Bush. It may have been in that respect that they were most representative of their constituents. For ten years I worked sporadically as a furniture mover, and I rarely saw many books in people's houses, except in those of Bible salesmen and schoolteachers.

I became a reader after I fractured my skull at six years of age. For several months I was bedridden, and for a year the left side of my face was paralyzed. Because I was unable to attend school or run about, my mother patiently and lovingly taught me to read—mostly comic books, though that Christmas my grandmother gave me a subscription to the *Sporting News*. By that September, when I began first grade for the second time, I had the habit of reading, and have continued in its grip.

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This book's title derives not from a poem but from a review by the young journalist Walt Whitman of an exhibition of American painting. Referring to a portrait of a young American boy, Whitman declares the painting unmarred by "the stamp of class" that confines much Old World art. Most of the poets treated in this book, whatever their social origins, shared Whitman's dream of a genuinely democratic and classless society. Many, perhaps all, were eventually disappointed. If there's a thread connecting the various essays in this book, it passes through those dreams and disappointments.

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