

## *The Collected Poems*

by Stanley Kunitz

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### A Reading and Discussion Guide

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#### **SUMMARY:**

Stanley Kunitz, born on July 28, 1905, is considered by many to be the foremost dean of American poetry. Twice appointed U.S. Poet Laureate -- the second time at the age of 95 -- Kunitz is famous for his vivid, incantatory poems, his remarkably productive long life, his translation of Russian verse, his self-made terraced perennial gardens in Provincetown, Massachusetts, and his life-long support and patronage of poetry. He has functioned as an influential judge for the Yale Younger Poets series; he helped to create and develop vital arts institutions, such as Poet's House in New York City and the Provincetown Fine Arts Work Center, and he anchored Columbia's creative writing program from the 1960s to the 1980s, where superbly gifted (and grateful) students like Louise Gluck and Marie Howe honed their poems under his discerning eye and unerring ear.

*The Collected Poems* (published in 2000) gathers together long out-of-print early poems with the later work published in *Passing Through: New and Selected Later Poems* (1995). The collection traces the poet's change from a compressed, intellectual style to an open, "transparent" style; it uncovers some of the central metaphors for loss and recovery in the poet's life, and it documents the role of the poet as witness to almost all of the important events of the twentieth century and beyond.

#### **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:**

*General hint: when discussing Kunitz's poems, read them aloud first. Much of the meaning and a great deal of the power is released when you **hear** the poems.*

1. In the opening prose section of *The Collected Poems* titled "Reflections", Kunitz states, "I dream of an art so transparent that you can look through it and see the world." Read an early poem like "First Love" (p.42); follow that with a reading of a later poem, "The Testing Tree" (p.180). In what ways can you detect Kunitz's move toward "transparency"? Where can you "look through...and see the world?"
2. In many poems Kunitz explores the loss of his father. Read aloud "Father and Son" (p.62) and "The Portrait" (p.142). In what ways has his father's suicide affected

Kunitz's personal life? What has this pivotal event in the psychic life of the author taught him about grief and trauma and memory? Can you apply the metaphor of the loss of the father to broader events / themes in twentieth century history, politics, and religion?

3. Kunitz's love of gardening contributes to many poems that use, as key images, digging, archaeology, litter, layers, and excavating. Read aloud "The Layers" (p.217). How does the image of "layering" serve to explore both a personal past and a history of the human species?
4. In the "Reflections" section Kunitz states, "Sometimes I feel ashamed that I've written so few poems on political themes, on the causes that agitate me." Yet his poems often underscore the role of the poet as witness to our time. Read aloud "The Wellfleet Whale" (p.241) In what ways can this poem be called "political"?
5. In "Reflections" Kunitz observes: "Years ago I came to the realization that the most poignant of all lyric tensions stems from the awareness that we are living and dying at once." Which poem, in your estimation, best illustrates this "poignant tension." Why?

### **BACKGROUND INFORMATION:**

Kunitz's father, a Lithuanian immigrant, committed suicide by drowning himself in a public park just weeks before Kunitz was born; Yetta, his hard-working mother, was so traumatized by the death that she forbade any mention of him ever again in the house and raised her son and two older daughters in Worcester, Massachusetts. She later remarried a gentle man who showed interest in and affection for young Stanley. Sadly, he also died prematurely, reinforcing the loss of the father, a dominant theme in many of Kunitz's poems.

Kunitz graduated summa cum laude from Harvard in the early 1920s, staying on to complete a Master's degree. He assumed he would become a junior faculty member in the English Department, as was customary for Harvard's best and brightest. However, he was told that "Anglo Saxons would resent being taught English by a Jew, even a Jew with a summa cum laude." He left Harvard and had no real contact with universities for almost twenty years.

Instead, he worked at a series of subsistence jobs (as a reporter in Worcester, an editor in New York City, and during the Depression, as a farmer in Connecticut, and later, Pennsylvania.)

He was drafted in World War II, even though he was a pacifist, and published two volumes of poetry, *Intellectual Things* and *Passport to the War*, neither of which made much impression on the literary world. In 1958, with the publication of his *Selected Poems, 1928-1958*, critics began to sit up and take notice. That collection won the Pulitzer Prize and

inaugurated an intensely productive period that his editor and friend Peter Davison termed, “Kunitz’s great old age.”

Happily married to poet and artist Elise Asher and moving between their New York Village apartment and their summer home in Provincetown’s rich artists’ colony, Kunitz’s work deepened and ripened. By almost any measure, he has become one of the most widely admired poets of our time. As Peter Davison suggests, Stanley Kunitz’s poetic career defied most expectations, since he “was a good poet until his 70s, when he became a great poet.”

### **HELPFUL LINKS:**

Norton Poets Online: includes a collection of website links

<http://www.nortonpoets.com/kunitzs.htm>

*Boston Review*, book review, by Steven Burt

<http://www.bostonreview.net/BR25.6/burt.html>

*American Poet*, “Openhearted: Stanley Kunitz and Mark Wunderlich in Conversation”

<http://www.poets.org/poems/prose.cfm?prmID=2015&CFID=13493813&CFTOKEN=21765492>

*New York Times*, “Wiser, Kunitz Returning as Laureate” by Dinitia Smith

<http://www.nytimes.com/library/books/080200poet-laureate.html>



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