

# “THE STAR-SPANGLED BANNER”

## AS A POEM

By Eli Siegel

Poetry...takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity.—*Wordsworth*

In 1814, “The Star-Spangled Banner” was written; and it is my purpose to consider it as a poem—belonging to literature. It is difficult for people to see the famous writing of Francis Scott Key as poetry, or as art. Perhaps it will help to have our national song estimated as literature if it is remembered that five or so months before Key wrote his famous work in Maryland, Shelley wrote the lines included in *The Oxford Book of English Verse* beginning “Away! the moor is dark beneath the moon.” And in 1814, the year of the bombardment of Fort McHenry and Key’s excited and calm penning of “The Star-Spangled Banner,” Jane Austen published *Mansfield Park*; Walter Scott published *Waverley*; and William Wordsworth *The Excursion*.

I am giving all these literary facts because I believe that “The Star-Spangled Banner” belongs to poetry and successful aesthetics. It is just as hard to see a work that is too familiar as one that is “sprung” upon us. It is necessary, therefore, to look at “The Star-Spangled Banner” afresh, as sometimes it is necessary to do with the most quoted lines of *Hamlet*. If possible, it certainly is desirable to combine the attitude of an excited Baltimorean seeing the song as a handbill in September 1814 and that of some eternal and judicial person in Oxford, who doesn’t mind feeling a bit like the air over a Himalayan peak.

The first thing noticeable is that the title has some aesthetic tension. There is the juxtaposition of “star-spangled” with its sense of little bright planes and the broadness and openness of “banner.” A flag, after all, can be seen as an abstract painting; an arrangement of planes, lines, and colors.

### Form, and the Feelings of People

The opening of the poem is abrupt and effective: “O say, can you see, by the dawn’s early light.” The line can be seen as beginning with an iambic—“O sáy”—followed by three anapaests. The effect, then, is first arresting and then free, swift, and open. Of course, the visual content of the words helps here.

The second line consists of four anapaests with an extra syllable—the “ing” in “gleaming.” This line is swelling and dignifiedly free and open: “What so próudly we háiled at the twílight’s last gléaming.”

The third line is strictly anapaest, twelve syllables in four feet: “Whose broad strípes and bright stárs, through the clóuds of the fight.” The whole line is monosyllabic. The placing of “broad stripes” with their horizontal, quiet effect and “bright stars” with the effect of luminous planes—against the mobile “clouds of the fight,” is aesthetically fine. This line is one of the mighty lines in American poetry.

The fourth line changes from an object, the banner, to persons watching. The first half of the line is tense and static—“O’er the ramparts we watched”—while the second half goes into flowing, large motion—“were so gallantly streaming!”

I have gone into the first four lines of the poem

somewhat in detail, because this quatrain is a lovely example of quietness merged with motion; and of the form and shape of a thing seen with the feelings of people.

### Good Persisted

The next lines are about joy and surprise. The flag as a meaningful, definite object and symbol remains while there is great turbulence; and while the turbulence itself is a means of seeing the sought for symbol more clearly. It is the “rocket’s red glare” and the “bombs bursting in air” which enable the writer to see the flag. The effect is a little like the storm scene in *King Lear*. Commotion is a means for the writer of “The Star-Spangled Banner” to see clearly, and commotion seems to help the distressed Shakespearean king to see.

What I am getting at is that, history aside, Francis Scott Key had a great emotion. Dark and light came together; what seemed good persisted amid what appeared to be the unrestrained storminess and disarray of evil. Somewhere, even in the midst of bellicosity, bombardment, and confusion, Key brought the tranquillity which gave structure to what he felt. The permanent meaning of the quietness in the turbulence and hurly-burly of life he must have felt. It is significant that in Benson Lossing’s *Popular Cyclopaedia of United States History*, Key is described as “well known for his affability of manner”; and the chief reason he was on a British ship was that he thought he could persuade the British to free an American, taken along from Washington as prisoner.

After the rather specific intensity of the first eight lines, the poem becomes more general. There is an interesting relation in “The Star-Spangled Banner” between an immediate happening and some everlasting significance.

### There Will Be the Crash of Hope

The second stanza begins with suspense and picture, accurately given in proceeding and arrested anapaests: “On that shóre dimly séen through the místs of the déep.” The following line is not quite so good, but history continues to be breathless, as the “host in dread silence reposes.”

Then there is motion, there is surprise; there is a profound flutter. The breeze is going to bring the hopes of man. That hope the breeze both “conceals” and “discloses.” Here we have the great and old idea of something still good and beautiful and moving in weighty sadness, oppressive magnitude of pain and ugliness. Key manages poetic suspense very well. The hope of man after seeming to come forth delicately from sudden, wide silence and stillness, “catches the gleam”; then “in full glory” shines. And there is culmination, or what is in music called a diapason. The crash of hope has taken place.

The third stanza is much inferior to the first two. Key is away from man, from the everlasting heart of man. He no longer is saying, as he did, that good per-

sists in both fearful commotion and awing immobility. It is the first two stanzas that make Key's song the great poem it is. However, the third stanza is still more than the rhetoric of superiority. The emotion that had taken Key has not entirely gone. The poetic impetus is in the third stanza, too.

### The Wish of Americans

The fourth stanza has a larger, richer music than the third. In sober, yet energetic lines, Key describes the wish of Americans to be themselves, and to have a beautiful relation with the whole world. Should the deepest, truest life of Americans be interfered with, then the people of this land, seeing their cause as at one with justice and the will of God, will meet that interference: "Then conquer we must, when our cause it is just."

There is a fine sincerity in this stanza. The language, though, has not the wonder of the first two stanzas. The visual and the auditory are not in magnificent intermingling as they were earlier. Key is flagging a bit, and an interesting sign of this is the aesthetically superfluous use of internal rhyme in the third and fourth stanzas—which we do not find in the first two. As illustration, in the third stanza we have: "No refuge could save the hireling and slave"; and in the fourth stanza there is: "Then conquer we must, when our cause it is just."

I am dealing with this matter of internal rhyme because in the first two stanzas Key has managed powerfully the discipline and symmetry of metre and rhyme with the freedom and easy assertiveness of prose. He managed with decided effectiveness masculine rhymes like "light" and "fight" with feminine rhymes like "gleaming" and "streaming." In the last two stanzas, however, surprise and calm, assertiveness and casualness are not merged so well. Yet, I think it well to say again, in the whole poem there is the poetic, deep impetus.

### Form in the Midst of Crisis

It is important for us to see how in a historical moment, calm and excitement can become one in a person's mind, as they are one, in ordinary life, for a Shakespeare or Herrick, a La Fontaine or Hugo. Key's

excitement in symmetry enables him to get the effects of painting and those of music at once. I'll go so far as to say that in the first lines of the second stanza—"On that shore dimly seen through the mists of the deep, / Where the foe's haughty host in dread silence reposes"—there is a tactual effect, a "plastic" effect in space, akin to that of architecture and sculpture.

It has been mentioned that Key saw the American flag for a while in a way that an abstract painter sees horizontals and small planes, the flowing and the static. The desire for form can exist in a person in the midst of crisis; as part of culmination.

### American History Has Poetry

I have tried to give reasons why "The Star-Spangled Banner" is of poetry and art. There are a few other poems which are deep art, and in one way or another are part of American history, such as "John Brown's Body," "All Quiet along the Potomac," and "Casey Jones." These also should be looked at afresh. Meanwhile: as Fort McHenry, at Baltimore, was being bombarded during the night of September 13-14, 1814, poetry was going on too. When the flag of Fort McHenry kept on being where it was, kept on waving, poetry was being helped.

"The Star-Spangled Banner" seems to question, but, as I see it, really supports Wordsworth's famous statement about poetry, that it "takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity." The "recollection" in tranquillity took place in a strange, hardly obvious way in Francis Scott Key, but I think it did take place. In 1821, seven years after "The Star-Spangled Banner," Percy Bysshe Shelley in his *A Defence of Poetry*, was to write sentences which concern the coming to be and the meaning of Key's song: "Poetry is the record of the best and happiest moments of the happiest and best minds....Poetry turns all things to loveliness; it exalts the beauty of that which is most beautiful, and it adds beauty to that which is most deformed; it marries exultation and horror, grief and pleasure, eternity and change; it subdues to union under its light yoke, all irreconcilable things."

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**ELI SIEGEL** (1902-1978), poet, critic, philosopher, educator, grew up in Baltimore, Maryland. In 1925 his "Hot Afternoons Have Been in Montana" won the esteemed *Nation* Poetry Prize. "I say definitely," William Carlos Williams was to write of it, "that that single poem, out of a thousand others written in the past quarter century, secures our place in the cultural world."

Beginning in 1941, the year he founded the philosophy Aesthetic Realism, Mr. Siegel gave thousands of lectures on poetry, history, economics—all the arts and sciences. And he gave thousands of individual lessons to men, women, and children, which taught a new way of seeing the world

based on this principle: *"The world, art, and self explain each other: each is the aesthetic oneness of opposites."*

Those lessons are the basis of Aesthetic Realism consultations now given at the Aesthetic Realism Foundation in New York and by telephone worldwide. There are also public seminars and dramatic presentations, and classes, including a workshop in the Aesthetic Realism Teaching Method—the educational method used with historic success for over 25 years in classrooms from elementary school through college.

Among Mr. Siegel's many published works are *Self and World: An Explanation of Aesthetic Realism*; *Hot Afternoons Have Been in Montana*:

*Poems*, which was nominated for a National Book Award in 1958 (John Henry Faulk, speaking of the poems in this book, said on CBS radio, "Eli Siegel makes a man glad he's alive"); *Hail, American Development*, containing 178 poems, including 32 translations; *James and the Children: A Consideration of Henry James's "Turn of the Screw"*; and *Goodbye Profit System: Update*.

Eli Siegel taught how crucial it is for people, in order to like themselves, to want to know and respect other people and the world. The following passionate, logical, musical lines from "Hot Afternoons Have Been in Montana" stand for that just way of seeing—which he had all the time:

The world is waiting to be known; Earth, what it has in it! The past is in it;  
All words, feelings, movements, words, bodies, clothes, girls,  
trees, stones, things of beauty, books, desires are in it; and all are to be known;  
Afternoons have to do with the whole world;  
And the beauty of mind, feeling knowingly the world!