



THE SECRET WARMTH OF WORDS

By Norman Weinstein

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Weary from the tasks of journalism to keep bread on the table, I treated myself to a reading of George Oppen's poetry, and found my spirit refreshed by a poem entitled "The Source." Oppen opens with a gritty cityscape where "even the sidewalk/Rasps under the feet." Then he shifts his vision, in a parallel to the painter Edward Hopper, to a luminous, unclothed, woman's body, framed through a brick tenement window. Her imagines her "in step naked to the wooden floor!" and concludes the poem with "The city's/secret warmth."

What impressed me, and refreshed me from exhaustion was leapfrogging beyond Oppen's last line, and thinking of the secret warmth writing can create. That writing effectively implies my patterning words that possess an emotional energy has been long known. But how does that quest for writing with emotional sinew lead to the notion of "secret warmth"?

As an adolescent would-be poet, writing was a channel for a type of intense emotional catharsis. The notion of raging heat poetically was the fashion then when I started, in the heyday of The Beats led by howling Mr. Ginsberg. Looking back on their writing, and my pathetic attempts during the 60s at passionate poetic utterance, I'm struck at how much more heat than light, or "secret warmth," was generated. My writing in recent years seems to be as emotionally passionate, if not more, as that in my teens – but seems refined by meditative warmth, a secret warmth since obvious catharsis no longer seems an aspiration when I confront feelings while tethered to a keyboard.

Rather than catharsis, I'm seeking clarity, a clarifying of emotions through choices of words, and patterns both musical and image-clustering, when I write. Initially, I feared this change from my let-it-all-hang-out youth was a dampening of passion, a gauzy emotional reserve that the savage losses of muddled middle-age can bring. Now I can begin to view this transition in my writing as an anchoring in the slow, thoroughgoing process of synchronizing feeling flow with writing flow. This has entailed patience with myself during periods of writing pale palaver, and learning a vocabulary faithful to my feelings as nuanced through the filter of my sensibility.

The warmth I discover now in my writing, as compared to my young fiery scribbling, is secret, occasionally to me as well as to readers. The emotional colorations vibrating through words, phrases, lines, and sentences can seem like vapor trails or clouds, barely palatable. Like a whispery husk of a long buried voice telling secrets. But a warming

voice, one familiar yet fresh. Consider the arc of paying attention to a filthy sidewalk – then looking up into an apartment building where the beauty of a yet unknown life fills a window, and moves head, heart, and hand to write. Such a shift in attention can be expressed in words shouting and exultant. But I want to open myself, and you, my unknown reader, to the secret warmth I'm about to write.

Norman Weinstein is a poet and educator who has led the Drop-in Writing program at The Cabin for several years and has worked in the Writers in the Schools program in Idaho and West Virginia. He is the author of many books of poetry, a jazz history, and a study of Gertrude Stein's writing. He writes about music and architecture regularly for The Christian Science Monitor. You can find him (when he's not at The Cabin) at home with his wife, the writer/artist/musician Mary Owen, and their cat, Chava.