

Nothing Stays Put: The Life and Poetry of Amy Clampitt. A Conversation with Professor Willard Spiegelman

WILLARD SPIEGELMAN, CONSTANCE EVERETT-PITE

Professor Willard Spiegelman has spent a long and illustrious academic career devoted to British and American poetry and is a veritable classic of American literary criticism. He was for many years the Hughes Professor of English at Southern Methodist University in Dallas, editor-in-chief of *Southwest Review*, and a recipient of fellowships and awards from Guggenheim, Fulbright, Rockefeller, and the Amy Clampitt foundation. With vigor, lucidity, and erudition, Professor Spiegelman published two monographs on the English Romantic poets (*Wordsworth's Heroes* in 1985 and *Majestic Indolence* a decade later), alongside essay collections on multiple American writers. In his 1989 book *The Didactic Muse: Scenes of Instruction in Contemporary American Poetry*, he explored how poets might resemble teachers, using Robert Frost's idea of "education by metaphor" as a springboard for analyzing poets such as Allen Ginsberg, A. R. Ammons, and Adrienne Rich, before presenting James Merrill's long epic "The Changing Light at Sandover" as a modern georgic, replete with artistic and human instruction. In 2005, he moved to poets less didactic and published a collection on contemporary poetry and the art of description titled *How Poets See the World*, which probed both styles of describing and description as a style, spanning the landscapes of John Ashbery, the meditations of Charles Wright, and the "new way of looking" embodied by Jorie Graham. Spiegelman's nearly 200 scholarly articles, reviews, and critical essays read poetry sensitively and assiduously, focusing in particular on how form contains and conveys meaning.

In recent years, Spiegelman has devoted himself to one American poet above others, Iowa-born Amy Clampitt (1920–1994), whom Spiegelman knew personally and whose correspondence he edited in 2005 for a volume of

selected letters, *Love, Amy*. In our conversation, we discussed his recent biography of the poet, *Nothing Stays Put: The Life and Poetry of Amy Clampitt* (2023), the cumulation of many years spent engaging with her five extant poetry collections and his efforts to piece together biographical fragments from remaining archival materials in order to compile a narrative of her life. Tracing her nearly four decades of artistic anonymity, her childhood in Iowa and early adult life in Manhattan, his biography narrates the surprise appearance of *The Kingfisher*, Clampitt's first book of poems, published by Knopf in 1983 when she was sixty-three. All but overnight, Clampitt rose meteorically to fame, winning Guggenheim and MacArthur fellowships, accepting prestigious writer positions at Amherst and Smith, and endearing herself to critics like Harold Bloom and Helen Vendler for a whirlwind eleven years before a premature death from ovarian cancer in 1994. Vendler, noting Clampitt's painterly sensibility and contemplative mind, wrote that she demonstrated an "assured and distinguished voice resembling no other" (Vendler blurb). Clampitt's fellow poet Anthony Hecht is also superlative in his judgment, noting how her "excellence has become a kind of standard," while another poet, Mary Oliver, declares that "few poets have a more dazzling verbal gift" (Hecht blurb). Bringing extravagance, polysyllabic explosions, and "adjective-bliss" (Oliver 129) back into fashion after the confessional verse of the 1960s and 70s, Clampitt's work was lauded upon release but has been somewhat overlooked in recent years.

Yet Clampitt's work acts as a helpful case study for exploring the complexities of the categories of "classic" and "American." Her poems position themselves in a deeply "American" ecological landscape, citing species of plant or bird native to the Iowan prairie, while also being steeped in an English Romantic literary tradition. Transposing "classic" literary landscapes into a Midwestern environment, Clampitt writes in a unique, unequivocally American voice which recycles rather than rejects the "courtly muses of Europe" (Clampitt 349), poetic forebears from whom Ralph Waldo Emerson avowed an "intellectual declaration of independence" (Richardson 263). Fellow North American poet William Carlos Williams stressed the importance of American "classic poetry" creating its own voice, measures, and forms which were discrete from classical constraints of the "old world" and commensurate with

the more diverse and profuse American landscape, both geographical and figurative, as he argues in “The Poem as a Field of Action” (Williams n.p.). Clampitt, however, forges an American poetic which not only integrates the English Romantic canon but triangulates with ancient Greece, proving herself to be one of the most classically aligned poets of her generation. She traveled in Greece, studied ancient Greek in Homeric translation classes, and frequently alludes to Greek history and mythology in her poems. The presence of classical Greece in her vision of America is not left uninterrogated, though. Clampitt’s poetry critiques the westward migration of settlers across the States, demonstrating how this path of conquest under the banner of classical ideals and constructed as the *telos* of Protestant progress damaged indigenous communities. In one poem, Clampitt juxtaposes the “new Athens, Corinth, Sparta” with “slave cabins” and “mud,” collocating the “glimmer of a classic” with displacement, dislocation, and destruction (Clampitt 148). The classical European past can be drawn on, then, but not without acknowledgment of its accompanying colonial baggage. Clampitt stresses the illusion of fixed points of origin and the fiction of any assertion of automatic cultural inheritance.

As we discuss, Clampitt conceived of her poetry’s classical engagement as a kind of recycling, an act of salvage where the “classic” is inevitably ruined, broken, or reduced to rubble, and can be recreated for a new purpose in the present. Rather than aligning herself with the modernist obsession with saving precious fragments from the ruins of contemporary society, Clampitt presents past literature as like these jettisoned heaps. In a move which recalls Walter Benjamin’s famous pronouncement that a work of art is always reproducible, Clampitt’s vision of “recycling” the classic imagines literature democratically as ever-accessible across time and space, not needing to be the product of a “mature civilization” as T. S. Eliot proposed in his 1944 address to the Virgil Society, “What is a Classic?” (Eliot 55), or bearing any accent of “high and serious excellence,” as claimed by Matthew Arnold in his 1880 essay “The Study of Poetry” (Arnold 6). Instead, her work integrates a classical canon of literary predecessors into her contemporary moment of mechanized modernity. The ecological and social landscape she draws on is inescapably “American,” reveling in rather than lamenting what she calls the

“pleasures of the ruined” (Clampitt 36) in the powerful closing phrase of her poem “Salvage.”

Constance Everett-Pite

CE-P: Professor Spiegelman, you are a specialist on the life and work of Amy Clampitt. Let’s begin by discussing a few details about her life, which you wonderfully reconstruct in your biography. Born in Iowa in 1920, Clampitt then lived and worked in Manhattan, traveled around Europe, spent her summers by the sea in Maine during her last twenty years, and died in 1994, just over a decade after her poetry rose to fame. How do these different places shape Clampitt’s life and work?

WS: Clampitt once called herself a poet of displacement, which is merely another way of labeling herself a poet (and a person) conscious of her surroundings, whether they remained the same or changed. “Nothing Stays Put,” the title of my book and a signature Clampitt poem, asks an important political/ecological question with heightened relevance in our current century: What is the meaning of “indigenous”? Who and what belongs where? Everything and everyone came from somewhere else, sometime ago. Some species, of plants and fauna, can take root and assume native, or pseudo-native, status. Everything is on the move.

But Amy, in her lived life, stayed put. She was poor for the most part. She longed to travel, and she relished travel when she was able to afford it. She was a homebody and a wanderer.

Most of all, she had three geographical components: Iowa, New York, and Maine. She was Midwestern through and through. Like many self-identified eccentrics, she felt out of place (in New Providence, in her case) and couldn’t wait to escape, first to college, then to Manhattan, where she remained for the rest of her life. She identified as a New Yorker, but like everyone else, she never escaped her roots. A little before she began to find success as a poet, she was leaving the city for a month each summer, to a rented cottage on the Maine coast, and it was there, and because of her environment, that poems poured from her. And not just poems about Maine and its population,

weather, landscape, and the sea that she gazed over. She was able to write about Iowa, as though Maine released something in her, and granted her the permission and the inspiration to reconsider her childhood and her native soil. She realized (a lesson she absorbed from Keats and Charles Olson) that the sea and waving fields of grain are the same phenomenon, although in different material registers. And the Maine lobstermen and their families who became her neighbors resembled the Iowa farmers with whom she had grown up. Conservative in the best sense of the word: they learn that human will and effort can go only so far, and that larger meteorological and natural forces, like wind and floods and drought and turmoil, can thwart or entirely destroy what human hands have tried to cultivate.

CE-P: She turned to poetry late in life, having written prose and drama with little success. Your book draws out her unique self-confidence, though. You mention, for example, how she wrote to her brother before she had published anything, that she felt she could write a whole history of English literature and know just where to place everybody in it—the reason being that, she says, “I feel I am in it.” Self-assured and incredibly well-read, Clampitt saw herself alongside her poetic predecessors from an early point. Besides Keats and Olson, who do you think were important influences on Clampitt and how might their work have helped form her self-belief?

WS: Clampitt combined to a remarkable degree a strong belief in herself and something of an inability to make real her gifts. As I have observed, she always thought of herself as a writer, but the biggest obstacle she faced was not confidence but an *uncertainty* regarding genre. She (mis)spent decades trying to write fiction. This is what she thought the market demanded. This is what, she thought, “being a writer” called for. But poetry was where she started. Fortunately, it was where she ended up. As with many young readers, Lewis Carroll enchanted her, and anyone interested in language can identify with the thrill she felt as a young girl when encountering “Jabberwocky” for the first time.

As a young girl, and throughout adolescence, her primary loves were Edna St. Vincent Millay (as much for her notorious life as for her ardent poems) and, of course, Keats. The influence of the former on Clampitt’s work dissi-

pated or vanished, but Keats's hold was lifelong. Much of what we associate with "Romanticism" lit a fire in the eager young aspirant.

When she got to graduate school at the age of 21, Clampitt bought a copy of Hopkins, and his rich, dense, heavily laden and mouth-filling diction went straight to her soul. At the same time, her love of language led her, first early and then late, to ancient Greek. Her father had been a Classics major in college, and learning the alphabet with him (and decades later buying a grammar book, and finally enrolling in beginning Greek courses in 1977–78) cemented a father-daughter bond. Like Hopkins, Greek inspired in her a feeling for the possibilities of richly polysyllabic verse, something a little outside the native English strain.

CE-P: One of the epigraphs to *Nothing Stays Put* is from a letter Amy wrote to her family from Greece in 1965, "It was all improbable and perfectly natural." Your book emphasizes the transformative effect of travel in Greece, and it interests me that she was so committed to translating ancient Greek in the original. Why did she need to see Greece with her own eyes and travel into the ancient language? Is it something to do with the "improbability" of Greece's survival, or the "improbability" of understanding an ancient world and its language?

WS: The commitment to Greek had Oedipal connections. I don't want to wax psychoanalytic, but it was perfectly natural for Amy, who was more deeply connected to her father than to her mother, at least intellectually, to wish to imitate and honor him by noodling around in the subject of his undergraduate major; how many Iowa farm boys majored in Classics? Probably not too many. In addition, her own bookishness, her commitment to foreign languages and literatures and to the European roots of American culture (one might say, too, to the Indo-European roots of the English language) would have encouraged her, naturally, to an involvement with Greco-Roman culture.

The remark from her letter about the trip to Greece summarizes, neatly, so much about Clampitt's life: "improbable" and "perfectly natural." What an oxymoron. But, also, how accurate an assessment, that she should have

arrived as she did, flinging herself with gusto into physical and intellectual activities on ship, and then on land. She always did everything with enthusiasm: it was in her nature to do so.

Interestingly, although she learned the Greek alphabet as a girl, and she took it upon herself to buy an inexpensive Greek grammar book in Manhattan, “Greek” really came after “Greece.” The physical life—travel—preceded a fuller commitment to the intellectual life, to finally getting around to taking her Greek courses at The New School and Hunter College. These were a kind of inevitability, given everything about her mind and drive. It’s interesting, too, that the classes came after her explosive artistic coming-of-age. She had finally gone to Greece. Now she was coming (home?) to Greek. A return to personal and cultural roots, perhaps. I think of those courses as a treat that she gave herself, something she had long desired and now felt that she deserved. A kind of self-indulgence that also signaled a sense of vocation and of intellectual responsibility.

CE-P: In letters, she writes about how difficult she found translating Greek. Two of my favorite poems, “Losing Track of Language” and “A Hermit Thrush,” explore precisely this linguistic failure. In the first poem, the question is posed “what are words,” as the speaker says, “words fall away | through the dark into the dark bedroom | of everything left behind, the unendingness | of things lost track of,” and in “A Hermit Thrush”—a gorgeous poem—bird-song prompts the reflection that there’s “hardly a vocabulary left to wonder, uncertain | as we are of so much in this existence, this | botched, cumbersome, much-mended | not unsatisfactory thing.” Despite losing track of language, the speaker does find a vocabulary of wonder. Might her poetry make “wonder” an attachment or an anchor amid all this loss?

WS: Amy the person was exuberant, enthusiastic, nervously energetic. Nothing excited her so much as travel and language, so a train trip with foreign tongues was just the thing for her. “Losing Track of Language” is a poem of loss and compensatory gain. What she does not understand reminds us of T. S. Eliot’s remark that some poetry (he was thinking of Dante) can be intuited if not entirely understood, that music has its own subtle or powerful effects to move us, and that catching small pieces of meaning can compensate for

swaths of ignorance. And I am reminded too of Robert Frost's remark that poetry is what is lost in translation.

But something is also gained, or found. In the case of the train trip, there's the erotic thrill of flirting with strangers, sharing cigarettes and poetry, and moving along to the steady—almost poetic—rhythms of the train itself. A means of conveyance: the train, a train of thought, a metaphor or a translation. It is nice to remember that “metaphor” in Greek, and “translate” in Latin are synonyms for carrying something over or across.

As for “A Hermit Thrush,” birdsong has meaning, which birds and ornithologists can understand, but ordinary humans cannot. The hermit thrush, like Keats's nightingale, Shelley's skylark, and other birds in English poetry, gives a message which we can intuit and absorb and use even when we cannot comprehend it.

CE-P: You write that birds, in particular, are both symbols and part of a real, physical world in Clampitt's writing. Her embeddedness in and attentiveness to her environment is one of her stylistic hallmarks and I wonder how you think her attitude to the American landscape compares to other writers, for example her contemporary James Merrill?

WS: Clampitt had a botanist's eye. She was (as Merrill was) attentive to minute details, but I think that her agricultural upbringing brought her closer to nature than anything in Merrill's more sophisticated and urban (and urbane) upbringing did. She shared with Marianne Moore and Emily Dickinson a deep interest in science. Merrill came, in his epic trilogy, to various kinds of pseudo-science, at both the cosmic and the atomic levels, but a reader never gets the sense that he ever got his hands dirty by digging in the soil. Clampitt had an eye to match Merrill's, but I think they focused their eyes differently. Birds were—as was clear in “The Kingfisher,” the title poem of her first book—symbolic and cultural artifacts, but they were also richly real to her as individuals that were part of ecosystems. Nature, like weather, was real to her because it was of the body: she knew it because she had lived in and with it.

Clampitt was, I believe, almost the only American poet to have successfully combined, or interwoven, the two essential strands of American poetry, namely Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson. Clampitt's work possesses Whitman's vast democratic sweep, his long lines; she shares his interest in historical and cultural phenomena, and an upbeat, optimistic confidence sometimes held in check by her concern for political and social malpractices she witnesses around her. In his various jobs, Whitman also understood physical labor like Clampitt, who worked on a farm and understood cycles of growth, harvest, and death in practical ways. But I think her truer identification was with Dickinson, who gardened, tended to indoor domestic activities, and was attuned to the rhythm of the seasons in ways that Clampitt would have found congenial. She has Dickinson's microscopic interest in the natural world, a Blakean "world in a grain of sand."

CE-P: Part of Clampitt's engagement with her literary past seems to stem from a desire to create community and a longing for company. Many of her poems adopt a collective, first-person plural voice and she often writes about migrating masses, flocks, and unified groups. On the other hand, though, your biography emphasizes her idiosyncrasy and distinctiveness, writing in a style which ran counter to the current of her cultural moment, although resembling, as you say, her nineteenth-century forebears, Whitman and Dickinson. How, if at all, do you square this need to establish a group identity with her preference for being singular and working a little out on a limb?

WS: These are at the heart of the matter. Let's think, for purposes of simplifying, in dichotomies. First of all: singularity versus plurality. Every artist wishes to, using a cliché, "find a voice" or develop a unique style. The urge is towards originality. For a poet, this means the right combination of subject matter and form. And, with regard to the latter, the tools are diction, music, metaphor, syntax, and tone. No one would ever mistake a Clampitt poem for one by someone else. She is instantly recognizable. She lit upon, then honed, then perfected her style.

One extraordinary fact of her style is that it came to her almost instantaneously, in the fall of 1977 during her creative writing workshop. Some of the hallmarks were evident in the poems of “Multitudes, Multitudes,” but those poems are waffling, bloated, a little off-key, in comparison to what followed. It’s almost as if she had sprung, Athena-like, from the head of some Zeus.

The social part of Clampitt the person relished group activities, which is why she liked the unique combination of singularity and plurality to be had in a Quaker meeting (silence, meditation, but in the company of like-minded people) as well as the anonymity of riding in a bus or a train in the company of other people with whom one has nothing in common, except shared humanity. I think of Wordsworth’s line “We have all of us one human heart,” which can be understood in several, overlapping ways. For someone who always felt like a misfit, it’s important to see how she tried to find a place for herself within a community, whether of living human beings or the company of dead poets.

CE-P: Staying with the matter of form and style, I love how you call the sestet a “classic form of recycling.” I am drawn to how often Clampitt writes about rubbish and the “pleasures of the ruined.” Your book emphasizes her love of junk and suggests that her accretional, accumulative, list-like sentences might constitute a kind of self-protection or a way to make meaning from the jettisoned. Rather than motivated by reverence, do you think her connection to an “old world” literary tradition might be linked to this “junking”?

WS: Much of Clampitt’s style comes from her desire to place herself in the company of her predecessors. She wishes to belong while simultaneously carving out her own place. Every great poet writes in three registers of language:

1. The words of her native tongue, the *koine*, I suppose one might call it. The English language.
2. Her own idiolect, that is, the fingerprint or DNA that marks an utterance as distinctly hers.
3. “Poetry,” by which I do not mean high flown “poetic” language or license, but the styles of language, and the habits, images and tropes that she has inherited and absorbed from both predecessors and contemporaries. Clampitt’s language often sounds like that of Keats or Hopkins, but it is also uniquely her own. In other words, she is taking something and re-using and renewing it. What is echo or allusion or quotation if not a way of having a conversation?

Part of her style, as everyone has noticed, involves the sometimes excessive making of lists, which could go on, theoretically, forever. I have associated this in her with a Whitmanian tendency (“multitudes” indeed). Accumulation is one kind of poetic form. It is also a way to stave off confusion, by marshaling forces into order, putting things in rather than leaving them out. She is a poet of accretion.

I also think (and say so in the book) that we may think of this as a way of protecting herself from the actual poverty of her material life. Not quite a hoarder, but a saver of scraps, she didn’t hold on to material objects with any fervor, but she did hoard scraps of writing, notes, as well as poetic bits, to be recycled and reformed at a later date. She would be a perfect poet for contemporary critics with an interest in ecological poetics. Perhaps “waste not, want not” might be a suitable motto for her. Any material impoverishment seems to be countered by a creative richness.

CE-P: Your biography came out in 2023, almost thirty years after Clampitt’s last volume, *A Silence Opens*. It cast necessary and welcome light on this extraordinarily unique poetic voice, while also demonstrating Clampitt’s commitment to contemporary political and social causes—for example, her protest against the Vietnam War or her role as a volunteer at a Quaker boarding school accepting Jewish refugees. A final question: What do you think is the most resounding message her poetry carries in our current moment?

WS: The word “message” makes me a little nervous, because poems do not convey or possess messages and lives, even exemplary ones, can become models for behavior without necessarily having a message to pass on from one generation to another.

Like Zeitgeists, tastes change. Clampitt dazzled us in the States briefly, for perhaps two decades, from 1979 to 1997, when *The Collected Poems* appeared posthumously. She enjoyed momentary popularity in Great Britain as well, but quickly fell from favor or even recognition. Her case is not unique. Virtually no contemporary American poet other than Sylvia Plath and Elizabeth Bishop has stayed alive and vibrant after death. Plath, of course, became sanctified owing to the myth that grew up following her death and Bishop’s rise in popularity seems linked to feminist and LGBTQA+ investigations into a life led deliberately out of the public view.

Clampitt’s case is different, for two reasons. The first is biographical. There is no dirt, nothing flamboyant in her lived life. (The poems, of course, are a different matter: flamboyance *in extremis*, perhaps to counter the mundane details of her private life). She cut an odd figure during her years of celebrity, a kind of Marianne Moore *rediviva*, a harmless, eccentric, bohemian leftie, what might be today called a “childless cat lady.”

The second is literary. At the time of her appearance on the scene, her long sentences, baroque syntax, scientific vocabulary, historical allusions, and general commitment to what may be sneeringly referred to as the “Dead White Males” of western culture, seemed like a breath of fresh air, or a new burst of wind, sweeping into the then current—and still pervasive—preference for plain speech in poetic language, and personal revelations in subject matter. She had committed herself to what Emerson called the “courtly muses of Europe,” but once Daniel Gabriel, her poetry teacher at the New School, exposed her to a different aesthetic that featured American figures like Herman Melville and Charles Olson, she expanded her cultural horizons and added more to the banquet that she served to her readers. She was absorptive.

On the personal front, Clampitt possesses no “message” for today but she certainly represents a model of how a person can arrange her life to honor political and social commitments in times of great turmoil; to keep private things private (her friends often knew very little about what she was up to, what she was writing, whom she was seeing) when she wished to remain unknowable; to arrange the details of her life so that she could live independently, with a “room of her own,” even when she became partnered with a man. She led a life of political engagement, fiercely fighting for social and political causes to which she devoted herself. And simultaneously she led an inner life, a creative one, which she mostly kept secret from her political allies on the picket lines. Wallace Stevens once remarked, before he became famous and his secret was out, that the boys at the insurance company would be as surprised to learn that he was writing poems as they would be if it turned out that he was working in the opium trade.

Since my biography appeared last year, I have received several handfuls of notes, letters, and inquiries from graduate students, young scholars, and even ordinary readers of poetry. Some of them knew about Clampitt a little and wanted to know more; some knew nothing and were grateful to learn about her; some were from my generation, that is, people who remembered reading Clampitt for the first time in the 1980s and felt that I may have rekindled an interest in her. Tastes change, wheels turn: could a Clampitt revival be in the offing? Let’s stay tuned.

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Constance Everett-Pite is writing a doctoral thesis at the University of Oxford on four twentieth-century North-American women poets and their diverse responses to ancient Greek language and literature. She has articles published on Elizabeth Bishop, Alice Oswald and Jorie Graham, and is interested in what claims ancient and modern poetry make about the non-human world (in particular about birds, trees, and water).