

Charles Ives, “The Things Our Fathers Loved”

How a mediocre poem is transformed into a masterpiece

Of all the essays in this book, this was the hardest to write. It took me a month. And even then, I was not satisfied with the result.

In good part that was because, although I love music, I don't know how to analyze it with the same surety I bring to poems. I don't play any instrument. I can't read music. When I took several music courses decades ago in college, I was by far the least musical person in the class.

I first encountered this poem in a biography of the American composer Charles Ives. I didn't think very much of it, but owing to the wondrous capacity of Spotify to bring to my computer speakers any kind of music I want to listen to, I played the song for which it provided the text.

Let me provide a bit of background on why I was reading that biography of a composer I had never understood nor particularly liked. A few months before I was at a chamber music concert. In the intermission, kind of filling the time with a question whose answer might interest me, I asked my friend Jane, who had taught music at the University of Vermont for many years, who her five favorite composers were. One, it turned out, was Charles Ives.

I've never been able to really get, or get into, Charles Ives. (Well, that was then. Not now. After my first encounter with Ives, I spent weeks reading about and listening his works. Now, I love his music. Not all of it, but a lot.)

I was so enchanted by Ives, and by “The Things Our Fathers Loved” in particular, that I wanted to write about it.

I struggled. The subject of this essay, what happens when poetry is set to music and becomes a 'song,' is tough territory, doubly tough for me because I am not so good at analyzing music. Music with words can move me very deeply: I love going to opera performances, not because I am an esthete, but because the combination of drama, spectacle, words and music almost always brings me to tears. In La Boheme. I start crying near the beginning and cry all the way to the end. I am sometimes an unabashed sentimentalist.

After writing this, I encountered songs in great profusion: This past summer the Lake Champlain Chamber Festival focused on songs, or 'Lieder' to use the German word for art songs. Schubert's Winterreise (on a mediocre series of poems) and Shostakovich's Seven Romances on Poems of Alexander Blok (on magnificent poems) brought me to tears, or maybe even beneath

them: Wordsworth concludes his "Intimations Ode" with these lines: "To me the meanest flower that blows can give/ Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears."

But feeling a song and responding to it is not the same as analyzing it, and as I have acknowledged, it was difficult to write about Ives because I was not sure I had the tools to construct a good essay. I guess all I can say now is, you can be the judge.

Two comments preceded my essay. Here they are:

When I told my wife that this particular email is long and has a lot of different kinds of stuff in it, she replied, "Well, isn't that the way Charles Ives is, too?" Her question was exceptionally apt, so I ask your forbearance as you read through the pages which follow.

There is also a lot here about William Carlos Williams and T. S. Eliot here. Again, I hope you will bear with me. I included them because they are, to my mind, the two most important poets to write in English in the first half of the twentieth century. They were, as well, both contemporaries of Ives.

The Things Our Fathers Loved
(and the greatest of these was Liberty)

I think there must be a place in the soul
all made of tunes, of tunes of long ago;
I hear the organ on the Main Street corner,
Aunt Sarah humming Gospels;
Summer evenings,
The village cornet band, playing in the square.
The town's Red, White and Blue, all Red, White and Blue;
Now! Hear the songs!
I know not what the words,
But they sing in my soul of the things our Fathers loved.

I recently found myself intrigued by what we might call cultural alchemy. You probably recall alchemy, that ancient proto-science which tried to discover how to turn lead into gold and how to make an elixir which would prolong life.

The poem you see above, to my mind, is not a very good poem. How does it happen, then, that this sort of mediocre poem, a moderately leaden collection of

words, has been transformed into a wonderful, golden celebration of the human spirit?

Teaching poetry, to which I have returned after six years of work in the Senate, I live in a world more shaped by poems than by politics. In the past six months I was blown away by the proliferation of newly-available translations of poems by Vladimir Mayakovsky. I was troubled by Baudelaire, deeply moved by Whitman, puzzled by Yeats, half-responsive and half-unresponsive to Gertrude Stein.

Occasionally at night in the past months I have read poems by Wallace Stevens; even ones I think I know well remind me of his line, “the poem must resist the intelligence almost successfully.” Heck, I think to myself, many of his poems resist my intelligence far too successfully. I understand much of them, but then I come upon a line or three that leave me chastened: What are these words all about?

Living daily with poems, some of the impetus which drove me to start sending out these emails has lessened. My original impetus was that Capitol Hill is far from poetry and yet needs it so much¹. That led me to spend time writing about poems, and sending the poems out by email to people in Washington and elsewhere. Maybe since I now live in a more ‘normal’ world, one that includes poems, I feel less impetus to send poems out? Who knows.

But here, today, is a poem. What characterizes it, for me, is that it is not a very good poem nor a noteworthy one.

While reading a somewhat drab biography of Ives, I ran across the poem, “The things our fathers loved.” Not much, I thought to myself, having read it quickly. Sentimental, maybe even nostalgic, and not ‘deep’ in the way I find some

¹ ‘And needs it so much’: I have always loved Jonathan Swift’s poetic epitaph in his “Verses on the Death of Dr. Swift,” a savage put-down of Ireland and in fact a true account of his actual financial legacy. Perhaps, who knows, Swift’s satiric lines in his poem prefiguring his death colored my experience in Washington?

He gave the little Wealth he had,
To build a House for Fools and Mad:
And shew’d by one satiric Touch,
No Nation wanted it so much.

Swift’s *actual* epitaph, in Latin, is less humorous but just as good.: Yeats translated it brilliantly in the second through sixth line of his short poem:

Swift has sailed into his rest;
Savage indignation there
Cannot lacerate his Breast.
Imitate him if you dare,
World-Besotted Traveler; he
Served human liberty.

poems: neither a revelation of the reality of another person nor a startling reflection of myself. Sort of a Currier & Ives² print, turned into non-rhyming verse.

I just wrote that the verse was ‘non-rhyming,’ but that was only a first impression. I noticed long afterwards that although there are no end rhymes, there are a good number of internal rhymes, consisting of both identical rhymes and slant rhymes (place/soul; all made *of tunes/of tunes* (‘all’ is repeated six lines later); organ/corner; Sarah humming/summer. And an extended identical rhyme, “Red, White and Blue.” The final line and a half echo what came before, using both identical rhymes and slant rhymes: hear, soul, and cornet/not/what, song/sing//think/things. So, phonically, it is better and more intricately made than I at first realized.

As I mentioned, I dutifully went to Spotify to listen to the song. And was blown away. With Ives’ music, the song, the mediocre poem, was suddenly magnificent. I listened to seven different versions³ and loved every one.

What happens to words when they are given music? Can a kind of o.k., not particularly noteworthy poem become a masterpiece? And if so, how and why?

To address those questions, let me quote a very strange piece of a long poem, an epic American poem. The poem is *Paterson*. It was written by William Carlos Williams between 1946 and 1951. In 1958 he added another section, a fifth ‘book,’ and it is from “Book Five” I am going to quote.

Paterson was and is a disquieting poem. Though often wonderful, it is also at times often unsuccessful as a poem. The daring mixture of poetry, letters, citation from books of local history, diaries, newspaper clippings does not always work as well as Williams intended it to. Still, were you to read it, you would find

² Currier & Ives were the great ubiquitous imagers of a bygone America. They made lithographs during the second half of the nineteenth century. That particular Ives, James Merritt Ives, had nothing to do, as far as I can tell, with Charles Ives.

³ Many versions are easily available on the web. I would recommend, a particularly fine version by [Jan DeGaetani, mezzo-soprano and Gilbert Kalish, piano](#). A fine version which includes the score can be found here: [Fathers](#).

There used to be a very interesting video – over 50 minutes – on YouTube about the singer Dawn Upshaw, who sings the song beautifully, beautifully. Alas, the web, especially the commercial web, is always changing, and the video is not longer available. She also sang, on the video, Ives’ “Ann Street,” a kind of schlocky poem he cut out of a newspaper and turned into a song! Life into art, schlock into brilliance.

that some the same techniques Ives developed in his music were used by William Carlos Williams thirty years later in his poem⁴.

Allow me to cite at great length an interview of Williams by a local radio show host⁵. The interviewer asks Williams a question; everything I cite below comes directly, verbatim, from “Book Five” of *Paterson*. For me it is a key passage in my lifelong attempt to address poems, to recognize what poems are and to understand how they work.

Q. Mr. Williams, can you tell me, simply, what poetry is?

A. Well... I would say that poetry is language charged with emotion. It's words, rhythmically organized . . . A poem is a complete little universe. It exists separately. Any poem that has worth expresses the whole life of the poet. It gives a view of what the poet is.

Q. All right, look at this part of a poem by E. E. Cummings, another great American poet:

(im)c-a-t(mo)
b,i;l:e
FalleA
ps!fi
Oattumbll
sh?dr
IftwhirlF
(UI)(1Y)
&&&

Is this poetry?

A. I would reject it as a poem. It may be, to him, a poem. But I would reject it. I can't understand it. He's a serious man. So I struggle very hard with it-- and I get no meaning at all

⁴ Ezra Pound once wrote, famously, to Williams, “You’re interested in the bloody loam but what I’m after is the finished product.” Williams quotes this line from their correspondence in *Paterson*. It is clear that Williams took Pound’s intended criticism as a compliment. He and Ives both recognized that rooting their work in the ‘bloody loam’ of American experience, even if that loam was sometimes ‘unpoetic,’ was necessary to creating an authentically American art.

⁵ The interviewer, Mike Wallace, would later go on to become famous as one of the hosts of television’s most popular news show, *Sixty Minutes*

Q. You get no meaning? But here's part of a poem you yourself have written: . . . "2 partridges/ 2 mallard ducks/ a Dungeness crab/ 24 hours out/ of the Pacific/ and 2 live-frozen trout/ from Denmark . . ." Now, that sounds just like a fashionable grocery list!

A. It is a fashionable grocery list.

Q. Well, is it poetry?

A. We poets have to talk in a language which is not English. It is the American idiom. Rhythmically it's organized as a sample of the /American idiom. It has as much originality as jazz. If you say "2 partridges, 2 mallard ducks, a Dungeness crab--if you treat that rhythmically, ignoring the practical sense, it forms a jagged pattern. It is, to my mind, poetry.

Q. But if you don't "ignore the practical sense" . . . you agree that that is a fashionable grocery list.

A. Yes. Anything is good material for poetry. Anything. I've said it time and time again.

Q. Aren't we supposed to understand it?

A. There is a difference of poetry and the sense. Sometimes modern poets ignore sense completely. That's what makes some of the difficulty . . . The audience is confused by the shape of the words.

Q. But shouldn't a word mean something when you see it?

A. In prose, an English word means what it says. In poetry, you're listening to two things . . . you're listening to the sense, the common sense of what it says. But it says more. That is the difficulty.

I recite the opening lines of this interview to myself, and to my students, all the time: "Poetry is language charged with emotion. *It's words, rhythmically*

organized.” Poems do more with language because in addition to their semantic content⁶ they have an additional level through which they communicate.

That level is not the realm of ‘deeper meaning’ which high school teachers sometimes extol or search for (and college teachers too for that matter) but the quite physical realm of sounds, of ordered sounds, that we sometimes call ‘music.’ Music is bodily stuff: we hear it and don’t just think it. We quite literally take it in, take the vibrations into our ears so that our eardrums vibrate in consonance. If the rhythm is loud and emphatic enough, we may even feel it in our bellies as well. The words of poems have music, too. They are “rhythmically organized,” as Williams so clearly told us.

But what if the rhythm of a poem is not sufficient, along with the words, to make “a complete little universe”? Because clearly, to me, the Ives poem does not do that. It does not meet those criteria of Williams, which I hold to because the criteria make such sense. “A poem is a complete little universe. It exists separately. Any poem that has worth expresses the whole life of the poet. It gives a view of what the poet is.”

I’ve already said that “The Things Our Fathers Loved” is too much, for me, like a Currier & Ives print. It does not present us with a complete little universe, but a pale reproduction of a reproduction of a bygone world. It does not seem, despite its autobiographical content, to give a really adequate sense of “the whole life of the poet.” ‘Main Street...Aunt Sarah...humming Gospels (in the parlor)...the village band playing in the square,/ the town’s Red, White and Blue.’ Come on! And then to end with talk about the soul, and fathers loving things....Aieeee!

But in Ives’ song the words, instead of depending on their own music – meter, rhythm, assonance, alliteration, rhyme, open and closed sounds – are accompanied by other music.

Suddenly, for me, the words take on a profound meaning. Profound.

With that music for voice and piano the poem moves beyond sentimentality and provides the listener with a deep and concrete sense of ‘of the ‘songs’ it celebrates, the songs which “live on in the soul” and connect us to our fathers. Both the actual fathers we have and the more metaphorical ‘fathers of our

⁶ The meanings of words, whether explicit [denotative] or suggested [connotative]).

country,⁷ those progenitors of the “Red, White and Blue,” such as Washington, Jefferson, Franklin and Adams.

I can hear – hear – in these words of the poem when they are sung to Ives’ music something that is different than what I hear when I read the words to myself, the words there on the page. Even when I read those words out loud and don’t just depend on hearing them in the mind’s ear they don’t ‘sing.’ But in his musical version, they do⁸.

At first, the music that Ives composed to accompany his words seemed to my ears simple, seemingly not something that would ‘elevate’ his words into a realm of astonishment and deep satisfaction.

But the rhythms and melodies he has composed are far more complex, far more like the complexities of many great poems, than they at first appear. Scholars study Ives, and in what follows I do not want to seem like I have just ‘invented’ or ‘discovered’ things about this song. I have depended on musicologists

Still, as with our reading of poems, we can hear things that we do not fully understand. That’s why we study poems, in classes and by rereading them and by going to libraries to see what critics say about them. Only bringing careful attention, or sometimes entering into dialogue with other readers, can help us understand what consciousness intuits... But more on how we can perceive things we do not fully understand, later.

Let us start with a few brief facts about Charles Ives. He was born in Danbury, Connecticut in 1874. The most important person in his life was his father, George, who was a bandleader, a village regular, not at all the successful businessman so many in his family were. Not the businessman which Charles himself would one day become⁹.

⁷ Let me for the first and only time refer you to the poem’s subtitle: *and the greatest of these was Liberty*. Surely Ives is referring to the Founding Fathers as well as our literal fathers.

⁸ Here is something amazing, which I think you can also experience. I can no longer read the words on the page without hearing their melodic accompaniment. Having listened to the song a number of times – I hesitate to say how many – the words and the music now cohere, as if there is an aureole around the words that cannot be separated from them. Strange, strange: the poem has been transformed, in my mind, into something it was not when I first read it. Alchemy!

⁹ In New York, Ives would establish and run the largest insurance agency in the U.S. In addition, the services he provided for his clients made him, as historians see it, the originator of modern estate planning.

George Ives was a kind of archetypal New England tinkerer: He loved to take music apart and play with it. With his young son, George Ives would play popular tunes or hymn tunes or marches and have ‘fun’ by changing keys or rhythms or playing two songs at once, sometimes each of them in a different key or rhythm from the other¹⁰.

Charles Ives’ relations wanted him to succeed beyond what his father did: they did not see a future as a bandleader for him. They sent him to prep school and then off to Yale. They encouraged him in playing sports, while his father wanted him to play music.

Charles went to Yale, and almost immediately after he entered college his father died.

In light of the biography, the words of this poem do, in an important way, “express the whole life of the poet.” The poem refers back to the songs he shared with his father and the music connects him, in the face of the largest loss of his life, with what he desperately does not want to lose. But this world seems very private. If we did not know the biography, the poem would remain sentimental and rather ordinary.

Knowing about Charles Ives and his relation to his father George can help us see that the song Ives has composed does in a very literal sense, “sing in my soul of the things our Fathers loved.” The musical world of his father lives on in Ives’ own musical memory. His ‘soul’ serves as the repository of his memory of his father, of the music his father loved, of the music he loved with his father. Still, our knowledge of this does not make the poem a good poem. It does, however, add a dimension that, maybe, justifies the sentimentality more than we originally realized.

I just wrote that the poem sings of these songs “in a very literal sense.” I meant it. Short as the song is, it contains a lot of musical references – in a poem we would call them allusions – to other songs. Let’s look at a few. In doing this, it might be helpful for you to revisit Hampson’s performance on YouTube, since it presents us not only with the words but the score.

¹⁰ The composer Charles Ives would continue to these ‘games’ all his musical life. Though he was deeply committed to music, music so experimental and ‘modern’ that much of it would not be performed for thirty or forty years after he wrote it, some element of ‘fun’ that connected him back to his youth was always there. What father and son did in their ‘playing around’ was explore what later on historians and musicologists would come to call polytonality and polyrhythm. Both of these modernist techniques would mark the music of Ives’s maturity.

Wonder of wonders, the song begins (measure 1) with the notes of...Dixie! It all goes by so fast you may not be able to hear it; but if you go to the wonderful blog¹¹ that informs much of this analysis, you can hear excerpts from the songs Ives 'quotes' as well as the song "The Things Our Fathers Loved."

Printing out those pages is not sufficient: you'll have to go to the blog-site and listen. It will, I promise you, make you a more attentive listener, even if you are a very good musician already. (And I am not. As I am fond of saying, the only thing I play is the radio.)

The first words of the poem, then, are sung to a melody we all know. It is just a fragment, just eight notes, and they are not even the most memorable notes of "Dixie." Still, the mind is a remarkable thing. We can enter a room a woman left half an hour before and still smell the slight trace of her perfume. We can hear a voice on the telephone and before the 'Hello' is finished recognize a friend we have not heard from in ten years. We can hear traces of a Mississippi or Canadian childhood in someone who speaks perfect standard American English. Walt Whitman advised, in considering his own biography, that we seek out "only a few hints—a few diffused, faint clues and indirections," and it seems to me that Ives is providing, in his music, similar 'faint clues.'

No, he is not a southerner, nor a partisan to the southern cause in the Civil War that ended fifty years previous to the song's composition. He is the son of a bandleader, now a grown man who as a boy together with his father loved American tunes. He will weave some of those tunes into his short and seemingly simple song.

There are other tunes in this brief song, including the folk tune "Nettleton" (later turned into a hymn tune) and "The Battle Cry of Freedom." All in the first minute of "The Things Our Fathers Loved."

At the end of the song underlying the haunting last phrase "I know not what are the words/But they sing in my soul of the things my fathers loved" we have, twice, the notes of "In the Sweet Bye and Bye," a song many of us still recall. That song of an afterlife, where living and dead will meet, undergirds the final words "The Songs Our Fathers Loved." The music assures us, without our being fully aware of it, that there is a continuing connection between the past and the present. That connection that is made by the underlying song, both in the literal meaning of the line in the poem (we, in our hearts, still hear the songs that our fathers loved) and of the line alluded to ("In the sweet bye and bye, we will

¹¹ To see the blog post, click [here](#).

meet on that beautiful shore...”). The connection is made as well in the associative realm, as the music reminds us that the music we heard with our fathers, when we were children, still echoes for us¹².

Let’s return to Ives’ use of musical quotation because it occurs at a significant point in cultural history. He wrote this song in 1917. Five years later, the most famous poem of the twentieth century, T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, would appear. It too would be a tissue of allusive references like the more or less contemporaneously invented collage¹³. Both Ives and Eliot and, many years later, William Carlos Williams in *Paterson*, would use the technique of verbal collage to create an entirely new work out of materials from previous texts¹⁴.

I brought up Eliot not to marvel at collage/pastiche, but to draw a contrast which seems remarkably clear to me. I don’t really like Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, though I am certain it is a very great and very accomplished poem. But when I encounter it, it always makes me feel rather small: Eliot knew so much, and I know so little. He carried in his head a huge compendium of human knowledge and accomplishment, and I always have to look up many of the texts he so effortlessly refers to. (The existence of the pages of footnotes to *The Waste Land* supplied by Eliot himself does not help in this process!) Eliot drew readers of poetry into a refined world where the best-read were clearly the best, and sometimes the only, readers. No others need apply.

Which is not where I think poetry should reside. Let me cite Williams one more time, also from a late poem, this one a long love poem to his wife called “Asphodel, that Greeny Flower:”

Look at

¹² The blogger I referred to, the musicologist Enoch Jacobus, perceptively points out that there are two forms of ‘quotation’ in Ives’ piece. One is direct, the use of small passages such as I have just referred to. The other he calls ‘stylistic’ quotation, and I will turn to that in a moment.

¹³ Picasso and Braque created the first collages early in the second decade of the 20th century, with perhaps the most influential work being Picasso’s 1912 “[Still Life with Chair Caning](#).”

This is extraneous, but let me point out something I find remarkable about art and its capacity to enter our lives. In 1910-1912 collages were at the very cutting edge of art, so much so that many regarded them as not within the realm of art at all. Today, every child in a kindergarten in the United States makes collages, brings them home to her parents, and the parents exclaim at how wonderful they are.

¹⁴ As the students learned in a recent seminar on modernism I taught, Leonard Bernstein argues that the great works of Igor Stravinsky’s neo-classical period in music are also based on quotation, on musical pastiche. [It may be worth noting that Stravinsky’s turn to neoclassicism is roughly contemporaneous with the composition of the Ives song we are considering.] See Bernstein’s marvelous lecture on [Stravinsky](#) by clicking on the link. It is a long lecture—long.

what passes for the new.
You will not find it there but in
despised poems.
It is difficult
to get the news from poems
yet men die miserably every day
for lack
of what is found there.

Poems talk to us, I believe, and tell us things we need to hear. As Walt Whitman says, in lines I have quoted before, “This hour I tell things in confidence;/ I might not tell everybody, but I will tell you.”

T. S. Eliot does, in fact, tell things in confidence, but he hides what he has to say under so much allusion, such intellectual battlements, that it is hard to hear him¹⁵. But Eliot’s way is not that of Charles Ives. Ives uses allusion is to pull us in, not to fence us out. I’ve already suggested that the mind’s remarkable sensitivity can pick up on some of the musical allusions, even if we cannot identify those allusions or consciously acknowledge they are there.

We can, on the other hand, clearly hear stylistic references to music we know. The most obvious example is when the words refer to “The village cornet band” and the piano plays what is, to us, recognizable band music. But even before that, I think the reference to the “organ” leads to a figure in the piano that is more keyboard-ish than what precedes it. When “Aunt Sarah” is “humming gospels” the song sounds to me like someone humming a song. When the words refer to “summer evenings” the music slows and becomes relaxed, despite the prevalence of sharps in the piano line, like a dreamy summer song.

What strikes me so powerfully about Ives’ song is that when it pulls on the strings of memory, of either specific melodic elements or stylistic types, it does so without calling attention to its artistry.

It is not that the song is ‘easy,’ for it isn’t. More on that in a moment.

But Ives takes as his cultural legacy something deeply embedded in memory – an instance of what the song’s words, themselves, proclaim. For T. S. Eliot, who propounded an important concept (it drove me crazy when I was a student) called

¹⁵ Leonard Bernstein, who admired the neoclassicism of both Stravinsky *and* Eliot, claims that this ‘objectivity’ in art is a central twentieth century strategy. Maybe.

the ‘objective correlative,’ a certain formula could stand in for an emotion. I know he didn’t mean it in this way, but I have always thought that Eliot’s allusions to Dante or St. Augustine in *The Waste Land* were a way to bring the emotional content and the impact of their works into his brief though epic poem. If you can pull all of St. Augustine’s trials and his successful conversion to Christianity into a poem by citing “To Carthage then I came” and “burning,” then a small number of lines open up to let a huge literary/emotional legacy come pouring in. An impersonal, objective legacy.

It doesn’t work for me. When I read *The Waste Land* – and I am going on about it because it is the most important poem of the first half of the twentieth century, and just maybe the most important poem of the entire century (and also because it was written at more or less the time Ives wrote this poem/song we are considering) – I just feel small because I recognize that I have not read Augustine as carefully and attentively as Eliot. I feel even smaller when I realize that although I have read a little of Gerard de Nerval, I cannot remember him at all. He was a nineteenth century French poet. I can’t remember anything else about him. Some of you reading this won’t even know that. Few to none of us, I honestly think, have our experience of *The Waste Land* ‘deepened’ by the allusion to Nerval. Unless we hit the library, and hit it hard and for a long time.

But I do remember “Dixie” and “The Sweet Bye and Bye.” And Ives does not even have to wave them before me – he just hints at them, so that they echo in distant recesses of my brain. They touch strings which resonate in my soul, if I can borrow the language of the poem, using a word I understand but do not ordinarily use. I just love – and I am using that term with full recognition of what the verb means – the American-ness of Ives.

What I am saying is that Ives is devising a particularly modern gesture here, of hinting at allusions. A previous generation of composers whom he admired, Dvorak and Brahms, used Czech and Hungarian folk tunes in their ‘classical’ compositions, but they foregrounded them instead of glancingly alluding to them. One of the things that, for me, makes Ives so modern is that he is content to hint at allusions.

The allusions, both literal and stylistic, are powerful nonetheless.

While I am on the subject of allusions, let me urge you to listen to some Ives. He can be tough. But there is something wonderfully refreshing about a composer who uses the American lexicon of music, who depends on folk songs and Stephen Foster songs and band tunes and hymn tunes, who is not averse to

using America's patriotic songs, as part of the fabric of his music. Did Aaron Copland, who used a Shaker hymn in "Appalachian Spring" and western music in "Rodeo," learn from Ives? As Marge says in the great American film *Fargo*, "Yah, you betcha!"

It is time to come up for a breath of air. Let me return to the question I asked at the start: 'How does it happen, then, that this sort of mediocre poem, a moderately leaden collection of words, has been transformed into a wonderful, golden celebration of the human spirit?'

I think we have some answers. One is that music can provide an external armature, a rhythm connected to the words that the words themselves may lack. So if, as Williams said, a poem is 'words rhythmically organized,' the music can remedy a lack in the words as they are strung along the lines on the page. A song, after all, is a 'complete' thing, words-and-music, not just words and music. So if the words alone lacked a certain rhythm, the music can provide it¹⁶.

Another answer to our query of how a mediocre poem can be transformed is that, for this poem, the semantic content of the music – those allusions, both literal and associative – add to the semantic content of the words, so that what began as a verbal Currier & Ives print becomes far richer, far more complex, far more full. The songs that Charles Ives shared with his father, songs we to a greater or lesser extent share with our American forebears, are actually part of the musical texture of the song he composed, and not just referred to conceptually, as they are in the words-on-the-page.

Another answer is that the seeming simplicity of the written poem (I do think of it as a copy of a copy of sentimentality, that it is a verbal reflection of Currier & Ives engraving) is undone by the complexity of the music. What appeared purely formulaic in the words is, in the song, something that is the very opposite of formulaic.

¹⁶ A digression. Skip it if you wish! This is a very large issue. Although Schubert was wise enough to set poems by Goethe and Heine to music, he wrote his extraordinary song cycles on poems by Wilhelm Müller. Many of his songs, settings of poems by less-than-distinguished poets to music, are wonderful. The first song cycle, Beethoven's miraculous *An Die Ferne Geliebte*, used poems by the otherwise forgotten Alois Isidor Jeitteles. Schumann, cognizant of the value of 'literature,' used Heine and Schiller, while Mahler, aware of the importance of the lyrics, used Friedrich Rucker. Richard Strauss for his fabulously moving *Four Last Songs* used Hesse and Eichendorff. But in the musical literature of great art songs, very often the minor poems of minor poets are totally transformed by the musical compositions to which they are set. The song we are considering, then, is not without great precedent.

To explain this last answer, the possibility that a complexity in the song undercuts its seeming simplicity, we have to descend into the song and its musicality one more time.

Some of you will undoubtedly understand the music to this song better than I: As I've already acknowledged, the only musical thing I play is the radio. So I can be in over my head in talking about musical keys or time signatures. But bear with me, nonetheless.

When we hear "The Things Our Fathers Loved," it sounds, I think, rather simple. But within several notes, Ives has already wandered from writing in one key to writing in another. The piano and voice start out in C major, but by the second notes in measure 2 the piano moves to a key that might well be E major (if you are not real musical, and unused to readings scores, you can see it by the use of sharps [#] in the piano line). So, from its start, the song is at moments 'polytonal,' written in more than one key at the same time (instead of moving, both the voice and piano line, to a different key, or staying in C major.)

I also believe that there are differences in rhythm between the vocal line and the piano line, differences that are most clear to my ear in the passages after the vocal line refers to the "village cornet band" and the piano plays a march rhythm in sync with the voice. Increasingly, in the next seven measures, the piano syncopates, so that the rhythm of the words and the piano don't precisely match up. There is a complexity here that is not in the original 'poem.'

And, finally, the kinds of stylistic quotation we have looked at – popular song, organ music, village cornet band, hymn tunes – are layered next to one another in a way that indicates that music is multivocal and not univocal, composed of many voices rather than presented in one voice. This musical text consists of a variety of voices from different places and indeed different worlds. Though the words of the poem refer to such a multi-vocal musical world, without the musical underpinnings they remain an unconvincing textual reference only. Hearing the song, we are shown – rather than told – that the musical world is multivocal.

Polytonality and multivocalism complicate the 'simple' and 'sentimental' words of the poem Ives wrote into the combination of music-and-words which comes to our ears as a song that refuses us the conventionality of formulas. What seemed conventional is not; what seemed sentimental is beyond formulaic emotional progression. We have leapt from the stereotyped world of a Currier & Ives print into a world of modern music.

In other words, there has been an alchemical reaction when the words and music are combined, and what had been one thing – a mediocre and conventional sort of poem – becomes something entirely otherwise, a deep experience that is once familiar (as are the tunes of long ago, or the words referring to a past of our youth that lives within our memories) and unfamiliar (as the tonal system we are used to is disrupted, and as the ‘single voice’ we associate with the self’s deepest longings is shown to be multivocal).

If you have been patient and borne with me throughout this consideration of the poem, and listened to it sung to Ives’ music in one version or another, you will find that when you go back to the beginning, and read the poem over again, it is not the same poem. And in this instance, not because you have considered the words more carefully or with more attention. No, when you reread “The things our fathers love” the shapes of the music cling, however faintly, to the words. It is as if a fragrance had drifted over the poem, and ever afterwards the words smelled of the residue of that fragrance. As if, and of course this is exactly what has happened, the music transformed the words, and continues to cling to them.