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Francis Scott Key, author of
"The Star-Spangled Banner"

"The Star-Spangled Banner" as a Poem

By Eli Siegel
with an
Introduction by
Edward Green

Introduction

On the morning of September 14, 1814, one of the most beautiful of American songs was created: "The Star-Spangled Banner." Francis Scott Key, who wrote its lyrics, watched through the night as Baltimore's Fort McHenry was bombarded by the British Navy. Would the fort survive? Would the flag still be flying in the morning light? The odds were against it. Just weeks earlier, British forces had burned Washington DC. President Madison had fled; so had Congress. America's democratic republic, independent only thirty-one years, seemed on the verge of defeat. Yet as the sun rose, the flag was still there! And Key, held by the British onboard a ship moored in Baltimore Bay, wrote these stirring lines:

O say can you see, by the dawn's early light
What so proudly we hailed at the twilight's
last gleaming?
Whose broad stripes and bright stars,
through the clouds of the fight,
O'er the ramparts we watched were so gal-
lantly streaming!

The national anthem of the United States of America has been loved for two hundred years. It has large patriotic meaning. Yet there is another, exceedingly important, dimension to the anthem—a value that has hardly been seen. "The Star-Spangled Banner" is poetry! Poetry the way William Wordsworth is poetry, and Percy Bysshe Shelley, William Shakespeare, and Walt Whitman.



Reprinted in the following pages is a classic essay by the great American poet and scholar Eli Siegel, the founder of the philosophy Aesthetic Realism. Written in 1953 and titled “‘The Star-Spangled Banner’ as a Poem,” the essay stands alone in showing, with keen and loving technical detail, just how rich the art of Francis Scott Key was. It also points to the ethical meaning of the anthem, including implications for our lives and for our nation now. The following introduction to the essay will not deal directly with Key’s poetry, since Eli Siegel does this masterfully. Instead, it will focus on the philosophic principles underlying Key’s poetry; make some observations as to the beauty of the song *as song*—how it is a true union of words and music; and conclude with biographical information about Eli Siegel.

Francis Scott Key and Aesthetic Realism

Aesthetic Realism teaches that art arises from, and satisfies, the deepest need people have: to like the world on an honest basis. All music is about this. What impels a true composer, choral conductor, singer, or instrumentalist is the passionate desire to see the world honestly and find beauty that can be conveyed through sound. In his essay, Eli Siegel shows that this is likewise what impelled Francis Scott Key as a poet. The flag, he explains, was for Key a patriotic symbol, but its meaning went much deeper. What Key wanted so intensely to express—through beautiful, verbal music, said Siegel—is how the “definite object and symbol” that is the flag:

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.

He then makes a wonderful relation to Shakespeare:

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.

And continues:

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 tranquility which gave structure to what he felt.

A central principle of Aesthetic Realism is Eli Siegel’s statement: “All beauty is a making one of opposites, and the making one of opposites is what we are going after in ourselves.” As the essay shows vividly, Francis Scott Key was moved by the drama of opposites he was witnessing: reality as dark and light; the storm and the permanence of things. And, yes, by the ethical drama of good and evil. What is striking throughout the essay is the inseparable relation of art and life. Aesthetic Realism shows that what makes for beauty in art is, concretely and practically, what men, women, and children everywhere yearn for to be happy. We need to put opposites together in our everyday lives—such as high and low, rest and motion, dark and light: the very opposites Key is dealing with in his poem.

My gratitude for learning about this is enormous. I studied with Eli Siegel in the mid-1970s. At the time, I had just graduated from Oberlin and was an aspiring composer. But in keeping with many, if not most of my contemporaries, I had put technique first. I was afraid of having large emotion and counted on a mathematically driven notion of musical structure to see me through. It did not work! And I learned why. Before one asks about technique—important as it certainly is—we need to see that art begins with emotion. It needs to be a particular kind of emotion: emotion large enough, deep enough, and passionate enough to be fair to what the world is and what a particular situation or object deserves. Vibrant, honest technique then joins with and follows from that emotion.

This is crucial knowledge for our classrooms, as I can attest through forty years of teaching a range of ages from children to doctoral candidates. First and foremost, everyone involved with music comes to a class, a rehearsal, or a performance as a human being. We come to music with the hope to have a

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“The Star-Spangled Banner” as a Poem

beautiful, large, sensible emotion about life. Through Aesthetic Realism, I learned that music is a means to this. “There is not one thing music does,” Eli Siegel said in a lecture he gave in 1951, “that does not say something about how a person

that looks beautiful to us. Technically, in the music, that oneness is achieved through an excellent use of the octave interval. It is the strongest interval in music, and in this phrase it makes for a convincing relation between the humble,

largest leap in the entire song—but it is joined immediately to a graceful yielding as we sing about the last rays of the sun. Words and music each in their own way show that opposites can work together; that assertion and authentic humility can be in a beautiful, satisfying partnership.

These opposites are in everyone—ourselves and all our students. And when choral singing is fine, they are together—each singer strongly holding his or her own part while listening to and blending deeply with every other singer. People are thrilled to take part in good choral singing; the thrill is at once aesthetic and ethical.



All beauty is a making one of opposites, and the making one of opposites is what we are going after in ourselves.

— Eli Siegel

should organize himself too.” What a greatly kind and useful statement! Let me now share some concrete examples from “The Star-Spangled Banner” illustrating this truth.

Pride and Modesty

These opposites of pride and modesty are beautifully together in America’s national anthem. In life we often wrestle with the question of how to assert our own self while remaining honestly humble—stirred by the meaning of other people and of the world outside ourselves. Right from the start, the anthem embodies the aesthetic answer: In its very first phrase, on a single breath, we descend to the deepest note of the song and then boldly rise an octave: “O say can you see.” To sing this phrase is to have an experience in which humility and self-assertion are completely continuous. And if it can occur in art, Aesthetic Realism asks, why can’t it happen in the everyday moments of life?

The opposites cohere in this phrase in a way we can learn from. It is not just a matter of “balancing” opposites; we need to make them truly one—have them work together for one purpose

low register of the melody and its assertive heights.

Phrase after phrase, “The Star-Spangled Banner” succeeds in bringing pride and modesty, self-assertion, and self-restraint together. For example, consider the line, “What so proudly we hailed at the twilight’s last gleaming.” We hear a boldness in the leap to “proudly”—the

“Anacreon in Heaven”

It is well known that Francis Scott Key did not write the music to “The Star-Spangled Banner.” He took it from a popular song, “To Anacreon in Heaven,” written circa 1775 in England by John Stafford Smith. As it happens, it was not the first attempt Key made to join words to that melody. He did so in 1805, with

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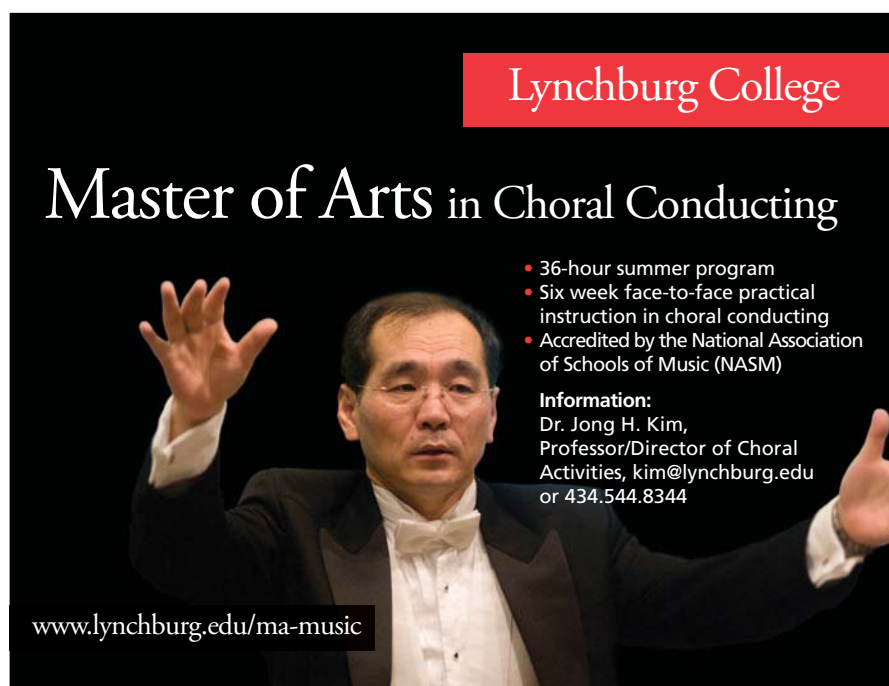
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lyrics celebrating the victory of Stephen Decatur Jr. and Charles Stewart over the Barbary Pirates. He called that song "When the Warrior Returns." It begins:

*When the warrior returns, from the
battle afar,
To the home and the country he nobly
defended,*

There are various reasons this song is hardly known nowadays. For one, the battle for Baltimore is more important historically. Yet the deeper reason is that "When the Warrior Returns" is far weaker as a song. The words and music don't fit well together. It is odd, after all, to have "returns" at the peak of a rising arpeggio. It sounds, melodically, as if the

warriors are departing rather than arriving! The word "home" is set on the very highest note, which hardly gives the restful feeling implied by the word; "defended," which implies vigorous energy, falls on the very lowest note. It is hard to picture a vigorous act of defending anything on that restful, low tonic.

According to Aesthetic Realism, technique is a means of conveying a true and large emotion without diminishing its strength and with the utmost clarity and economy. In "The Warrior Returns," Key falls short of authentic technique; in "The Star-Spangled Banner," he achieves it magnificently. Words and melody are gloriously right for each other.

What "The Star-Spangled Banner" Can Teach Us

One of the most wonderful aspects of Eli Siegel's essay is how it shows that the question of pride and humility, so important for the happiness and self-respect of individual people, is likewise a question every nation faces. In America, the question rages now—at home and in terms of how we see other nations. It was present, as Siegel points out, just as centrally two hundred years ago. In a later verse to the poem, Key writes: "Then conquer we must, when our cause it is just." There is an important stipulation here. Key says when our cause is *just*. It takes humility to find out.

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"The Star-Spangled Banner" as a Poem

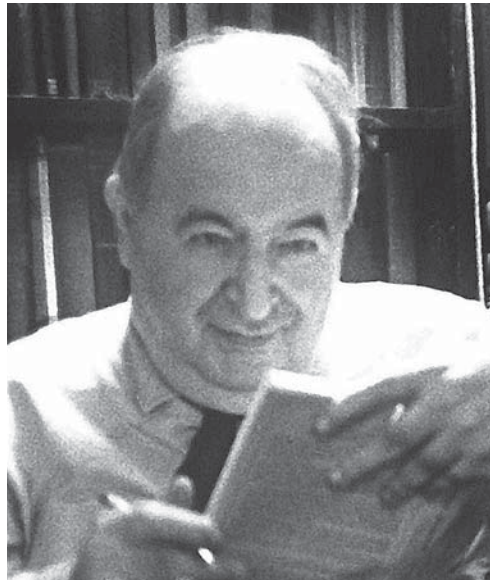
We cannot assume we are just; we have to question ourselves. We can't simply assert our willpower in relation to other countries; we need to ask, are we just to do so? This is the kind of questioning America needs: questioning that will make for solid, enduring pride in ourselves.

Solidity at one with honest questioning is what we hear again and again in the national anthem. Take the phrase "O say does that star-spangled banner yet wave." There is palpable uncertainty here; but as it is sung, the rhythm is very determined. It thumps, and it leads to the thrilling climax: "O'er the land of the free and the home of the brave?" This second phrase is wonderfully dramatic. On the same high note heard earlier on "glare"—as rockets flew threateningly overhead—we now sing about our freedom. By means of this melodic identity, danger and triumph are made one.

About Eli Siegel

It is my opinion that Eli Siegel was America's greatest philosopher and critic. He explained why, in every human culture, all the arts, not just music, are crucial for human happiness when he said, "The resolution of conflict in self, is like the making one of opposites in art."

Siegel lived from 1902 to 1978 and grew up in Baltimore. He was there in 1925 when he won *The Nation's* poetry prize for his "Hot Afternoons Have Been in Montana." In 1951, one of the most esteemed of American poets, William Carlos Williams, wrote: "I say definitely that that single poem, out of a thousand others written in the past quarter century, secures our place in the cultural world." In 1958, Eli Siegel was nominated, as poet, for a Pulitzer Prize; the same year, his first volume of poetry, *Hot Afternoons Have Been in Montana: Poems*, was nominated for a National



Eli Siegel, 1968 Photo by Nancy Starrels

Book Award.

After moving to New York in the mid-1920s, he engaged in years of profound scholarly inquiry, and in 1941 he began his career as an educator. He gave hundreds of lectures, ranging widely through the arts and sciences, philosophy, economics, and history. His publications were equally diverse; particularly important is the book *Self and World*. In thousands of lessons with men, women, and children, Eli Siegel taught the aesthetics of life: the opposites that people are trying to bring together in themselves. I am grateful to have been among the people who benefitted enormously from the kind, ethically stirring discussions that took place in these lessons.

On the occasion of his centenary in 2002, the city of Baltimore and the state of Maryland declared his birthday, August 16, "Eli Siegel Day" in commemoration of his tremendous achievements as educator, poet, and philosopher. A monument in his honor was unveiled in Baltimore's Druid Hill Park. His work continues through classes and consultations given by faculty at the Aesthetic Realism Foundation in New York City,

including the class "The Aesthetic Realism Explanation of Poetry," taught by Ellen Reiss. The Foundation's website is <www.aestheticrealism.org>.

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"The Star-Spangled Banner" as a Poem

By Eli Siegel

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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 prúduy we háiled at the twilight’s last gléaming.” The third line is strictly anapaest, twelve syllables in four feet: “Whose broad stripes and bright stárs, through the clóuds of the fíght.” 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 tranquility 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.

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"The Star-Spangled Banner" as a Poem

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 persists 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 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 tranquility." The "recollection" in tranquility 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." ■