



Stanley Kunitz, Poet Laureate, Dies at 100

By CHRISTOPHER LEHMANN-HAUPT
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Stanley Kunitz, who was one of the most acclaimed and durable American poets of the last century and who, at age 95, was named poet laureate of the United States, died on Sunday at his home in Manhattan. He was 100 and also had a home in Provincetown, Mass.

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Marnie Crawford Samuelson
Stanley Kunitz in 2003 in his garden in Provincetown, Mass. His last book was "The Wild Braid: A Poet Reflects on a Century in the Garden."

The cause was pneumonia, his daughter, Gretchen Kunitz, said.

Over the extraordinary span of his career — nearly 80 years — Mr. Kunitz achieved a wide range of expression, from intellectual to lyric, from intimately confessional to grandly oracular.

Among other honors, he won the Pulitzer Prize for poetry in 1959, the National Book Award in 1995, at age 90, the National Medal of the Arts in 1993 and the prestigious Bollingen Prize in poetry in 1987.

Mr. Kunitz was still at full power into his 90's and continued to write and give readings until a few years ago. For almost 50 years he spent his summers in Provincetown, where he tended his lush garden. His last book, "The Wild Braid: A

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Stanley Kunitz won a Pulitzer Prize and National Book Award.

Poet Reflects on a Century in the Garden," a collection of essays and conversations produced in collaboration with his literary assistant, Genine Lentine, also a poet, was published last year by Norton.

"What Kunitz's work lacks in glamour and commotion it compensates for in serious and decisive purpose," the poet David Barber wrote in *The Atlantic Monthly*. "That no shelf will ever groan under Kunitz's collected poetry is a measure of his daunting ambition as well as of his scrupulous restraint."

Mr. Kunitz shunned shallow confession in his art. "Poetry is ultimately mythology, the telling of stories of the soul," he wrote. "The old myths, the old gods, the old heroes have never died. They are only sleeping at the bottom of our minds, waiting for our call. We have need of them, for in their sum they epitomize the wisdom and experience of the race."

They awoke in him slowly. His first two collections, "Intellectual Things" (1930) and "Passport to War: A Selection of Poems" (1944), reflected his admiration for the English metaphysical poets John Donne and George Herbert and were admired more for their craft than their substance.

"In my youth, as might be expected, I had little knowledge of the world to draw on," he once told an interviewer. "But I had fallen in love with language and was excited by ideas, including the idea of being a poet."

Yet much lay at the bottom of his mind, waiting for his call. Ever haunted by the suicide of his father six weeks before his birth, he could approach the edge of pathos. In a poem decisive in his development, "Father and Son" (in the 1944 collection), he wrote:

*At the water's edge, where the smothering ferns lifted
Their arms, "Father!" I cried, "Return! You know
The way. . . .
Instruct
Your son, whirling between two wars,
In the Gemara of your gentleness,
For I would be a child to those who mourn*

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*And brother to the foundlings of the field
 And friend of innocence and all bright eyes.
 O teach me how to work and keep me kind."
 But the final two lines silence the outcry:
 Among the turtles and the lilies he turned to me
 The white ignorant hollow of his face.*

As he developed, Mr. Kunitz came to believe in what he called "the need for a middle style," one that didn't have "to be fed exclusively on high sentiments," as he put it. And in his mature work he contained his passion in the formalities of his art. The critic Vernon Young wrote in *The New York Review of Books*: "Conspicuous, in the most convincing of Stanley Kunitz's poems, is the tension produced in them by a controlled inhibition of the passion that threatens to break through."

Or, as Mr. Kunitz himself put it in his poem "The Approach to Thebes," (about Oedipus):

*Children, grandchildren, my long posterity,
 To whom I bequeath the spiders of my dust,
 Believe me, whatever sordid tales you hear,
 Told by physicians or mendacious scribes,
 Of beardless folly, consanguineous lust,
 Fomenting pestilence, rebellion, war,
 I come prepared, unwanting what I see,
 But tied to life. On the road to Thebes
 I had my luck, I met a lovely monster,
 And the story's this: I made the monster me.*

Stanley Jasspon Kunitz was born on July 29, 1905, in Worcester, Mass., the third child and first son of the deceased Solomon Z. Kunitz, a dress manufacturer whose business had been failing, and Yetta Helen (Jasspon) Kunitz. Because of his father's death, Stanley was haunted by nightmares during his childhood. But he proved a gifted student, and after becoming valedictorian of his class at Worcester Classical High School, he entered [Harvard](#) on a scholarship in 1922, graduating with highest honors in 1926.

He began writing poetry at the suggestion of a professor, then set out to earn a doctorate at Harvard. But on being told that he would not be offered a lectureship because the Anglo-Saxon students would resent being taught English literature by a Jew, he dropped out of the program in 1927 after completing the requirements for his master's degree. Instead he became a reporter and editor, first writing Sunday feature articles for *The Worcester Telegram*. He eventually settled in the country, buying a run-down farm in Connecticut.

From his new home, Mr. Kunitz began working in 1927 for the H. W. Wilson reference company in New York City, serving as an editor of the Wilson Library Bulletin and co-editing "Twentieth Century Authors" and other reference works. Under the pseudonym of Dilly Tante, he edited a collection of biographies titled "Living Authors: A Book of Biographies" (1931). He began selling poems to magazines like Poetry, Commonweal, The New Republic, The Nation and The Dial.

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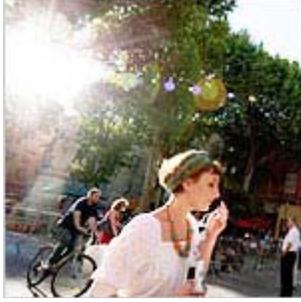
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