

Poetry Porch: Prose

Promethean Fire: Stealing from the Classics

A panel discussion at Poetry by the Sea
Madison, Connecticut
May 27, 2025

Speakers:

JOYCE WILSON, CHAIR
Opening Remarks

BRUCE BENNETT
“When the Sirens Call: A Life Altered by Luck?”

LINDA STERN
“Belief, Myth, Fidelity, and Original Texts”

DAVID KATZ
“Classics through a Modernist Lens”
<https://davidmkatzpoet.com/blog/confessions-of-a-modernist>

JOYCE WILSON
“Inspired by Virgil”

JULIA GRIFFIN
“Odd Issues from Ithaca”

Opening Remarks: “Stealing from the Classics” by Joyce Wilson, chair

At the poetry conference Poetry by the Sea 2025, held in Madison, Connecticut, the literary panel *Promethean Fire: Stealing from the Classics* explored the process of reading the classics as a writer and ways to make use of such material in a new poem. Panelists gave examples from their own work and works by poets they admire.

We asked ourselves the following question: What accounts for the influence of the classics today? The Hebrew Bible, poetry and plays from the Greeks, tales from the Mesopotamian—these continue to be read in English for their examples in meter, descriptions of nature, mythologies, and revelations about the humanity of the protagonists.

To be sure, those who translate into English keep classical traditions alive. But those of us who are not active translators also find inspiration in particular words, phrases, speeches, and whole plots gleaned from the classics. A phrase or sentence can offer a glimpse of corresponding reality that illuminates as it creates associations over the centuries. A passage can suddenly gain traction in the workings of our own poems if we steal, or borrow, from the classics.

Such borrowings increase the appeal of your work, as described by A. E. Stallings, who emphasizes that word choice, quotation, and allusion account for that extra something that separates the average poem from the great and lasting one.

Reading their own poems and poems by other poets as examples, each panelist focused on the use of classical sources: What was your experience in composing this poem? Did you begin with a passage from the classics or did the association come later? Did you find the classical material central to the poem's idea or did it come as a surprise? When have you found stealing from the classics most effective? Is this process like a theft, or borrowing, or receiving a gift? Do you find classical references make demands of the reader, that they be familiar with the source, or do the references bring with them a sense of the familiar?

Poems under discussion were circulated in handouts to the audience.

Participants

Bruce Bennett is author of ten books of poetry and more than thirty chapbooks. He was a founder and editor of the journals *Field* and *Ploughshares*. From 1973-2014 he taught Literature and Creative Writing and directed the Visiting Writers Series at Wells College. He also was a founder and director of the Wells Book Arts Center. In 2012 he was awarded a Pushcart Prize.

Julia Griffin studied Classics for her undergraduate degree; she has been teaching Renaissance English literature for many years, including as much Classical material as possible. She has published a number of Classical-themed poems in *Classical Outlook*, where “Odysseus’ Cat” appeared.

David M. Katz has authored five books of poetry: *The Biographer*, *In Praise of Manhattan*, *Stanzas on O_z*, and *Claims of Home*, all published by Dos Madres Press, and *The Warrior in the Forest* (House of Keys). Poems of his appeared recently in *The Classical Outlook* and *Able Muse*.

Linda Stern’s poems have appeared in *American Arts Quarterly*, *Big City Lit*, *The Classical Outlook*, *Crab Orchard Review*, *Kin Poetry Journal*, *Mezzo Cammin*, *Minyan* magazine, *The New Criterion*, *The Raintown Review*, and other publications. Her book, *Why We Go by Twos*, is available from Barefoot Muse Press. She is a co-host of the Morningside Poetry Series in Manhattan and serves on the Board of Directors of Poetry by the Sea.

Joyce Wilson is editor of the magazine on the Internet, *The Poetry Porch* (www.poetryporch.com), which has been online since 1997. She taught English at Boston University and Suffolk University, ten years each. A chapbook *The Need for a Bridge* and a full-length collection *Take and Receive* both appeared in 2019. Her sequence of poems “The Octagonal Schoolhouse” won the Samuel Washington Allen Honorable Mention Prize from the New England Poetry Club in 2023.