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Reflecting on Ways of Looking; Ways of Seeing

In Twain's reflective excerpt from *Life on the Mississippi*, he at first notes how deep his knowledge is of the river. He notices details as small as a "dimple on the surface" that most people might miss altogether. So as he begins, one might think he is better equipped to appreciate the mighty river.

Soon however, he relates that this intimate knowledge which he calls "dead-earnest reading matter" of the river has caused him to lose the ability to bask in the wonder and beauty of the Mississippi's magic such as golden sunsets, silvery roils, broad ranges of color. He muses on whether knowledge is more positive or negative. A river pilot must know his trade, but how can he maintain his awe and surprise. Doctors must experience a similar conflict, he believes.

In the poem, "Forgotten Language," Shel Silverstein similarly knows that he has lost something which he calls "the language of the flowers," but it hasn't changed into something more scholarly; he simply wonders "how did it go..." Neither knowledge nor wonder remain, and that's sad.

Walt Whitman takes it further in his poem about the learned astronomer who knows so much about the stars and can lecture and produce charts similar to what Twain must have studied as he learned about the river. Whitman however would prefer to look up at the stars in silent wonder. He calls the air mystical. One doesn't know if the astronomer can still experience this bewitching wonder, but at least his listener can.

Finally a disillusioned student laments that a beautiful poem by Robert Frost has been so deconstructed and analyzed for understanding that he doesn't even want to "stop by those woods on a snowy evening" ever again.

After considering all this, I suppose the best to hope for is balance. But I believe as well that if we set our minds to appreciate and wonder at the miracles and beauty that surround us every day, knowledge doesn't have to jade our senses. We can appreciate both.