

KARL SHAPIRO — COLLECTED POEMS



KARL SHAPIRO: COLLECTED POEMS 1940 - 1978 Random House 1978

by: William Packard

I get this long distance phone call from California, it is *Impact Magazine* and they ask me will I write a book review for them? And I say no, oh hell no, not a chance, I hate reading book reviews let alone writing them. I say *The New York Quarterly* hasn't run a single book review in over 9 years of publication and it never will so long as I have anything to do with it. Because book reviews are a bore, they're the pabulum of the publishing industry, they're like long-winded television commercials which are always trying to sell someone something, either a new book or what's worse, some chic new point of view. The vast majority of book reviews I've ever read are either blatant publisher's puff jobs or else they're friends writing about how great their friends are or else they're subtly vicious vendetta hatchet jobs on people who used to be their friends. Oh occasionally when Auden was alive and writing reviews for the *Times*, that was always a good learning experience. But who is there of that calibre on the reviewing scene today?

What I'm trying to say is, book reviews are a pain in the ass. Who really needs them besides the author and his publisher? Maybe the book reviewer himself needs them, if he's fallen so low that he gets off on seeing his own pompous opinions in print. But that's really low. And book reviewers who live on that level are always so tiresome because they're so fucking serious about everything and everything they say is always in such deadly earnest. As if a book review ever changed anyone's mind about anything. Must be these book reviewers are in deadly earnest because they sense they're peddling nothing but a lot of steamy horseshit.

So that's why I say no to *Impact Magazine*, but then they keep right on asking, isn't there any living poet anywhere in the United States of America that I'd really like to review? And I say nope, not a single one. They can all go unreviewed

as far as I'm concerned, I've got my own poems to write. But just then a name flashes across my mind. And I say hey wait a minute. How about Karl Shapiro? And *Impact Magazine* says you've got it man, you can review Karl Shapiro's latest book of *Collected Poems*. So I say okay and I hang up and I wait for Random House to send me the review copy of *Collected Poems 1940 - 1978*.

And I wonder why the hell I changed my mind and committed myself to writing this review. Well, I tell myself, I've never met Karl Shapiro and I don't owe him any favors and I'm fairly sure he doesn't know very much about me or my own work. We originally published one of the poems from his book *Adult Bookstore* in *The New York Quarterly*, it was a long historical voice poem about Beethoven called "The Heiligenstadt Testament," and I still think it is an immensely moving piece, one of Shapiro's very best. And I have been corresponding with Karl Shapiro about our doing an *NYQ* craft interview with him in an upcoming issue. In fact, I had read some interview questions onto a cassette, and mailed the cassette off to him, hoping he'd talk his answers onto the same cassette and mail it back to me. But this morning I got this letter from him:

Dear Bill Packard —

Am I the only person in the U.S.A. who doesn't own a tape recorder, doesn't know how to work one, and doesn't want to learn? Could you just write me out the questions and let me reply? . . . This spontaneity thing is beyond me. If poets supposedly are writers why can't they write. What is the idea of the on-the-run thing, like politicians escaping the reporter as they climb into their bulletproofs . . .

Cordially
Karl S

So of course I'll write out the interview questions and send them along to him, as soon as I finish this ridiculous book review of his *Collected Poems* for *Impact Magazine*, which he doesn't know I'm doing. But I still haven't answered the question why I changed my mind and agreed to write this review.

Probably one reason is that I've taught writing for the past 16 years at N.Y.U. and I've been damn grateful always for Karl Shapiro's *A Prosody Handbook* which he wrote with Robert Beum (Harper & Row, 1965), I still think it's the best single volume technical book on the craft of poetry. Also I've been glad for the sanity of *The Poetry Wreck*, which are Karl Shapiro's selected essays 1950 - 1970 (Random House), they are Shapiro's straightforward criticisms of Whitman, Yeats, Eliot, Pound, Auden, Williams, Thomas, Miller, Jarrell and other modern poets. And as time goes by I've come to appreciate both these books for their attitude towards poetry and life, an attitude I find refreshingly professional, uncluttered and useful.

But I know there's a deeper reason for why I changed my mind. Over the past 16 years the conviction has been growing slowly in me that Karl Shapiro may be the one American poet who has been a touchstone for our time, both in his life and in his work, and that he is someone who has been right about the major issues of our time more often than most other poets and critics. He is also someone who has curiously dropped out of the Eastern establishment, he has more or less withdrawn from the official American culture, whatever the hell that may be, and for whatever reasons he may have had for the withdrawal. And as I'm

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always deeply curious about these things, as well as grateful for what Shapiro has meant to me as an American poet, I guess that's why I changed my mind and agreed to write this review.

Collected Poems 1940 - 1978 carries the following dust jacket statement:

This volume is intended to replace *Selected Poems* (Random House 1968).

It was that earlier *Selected Poems* that won the Bollingen Prize in 1968, or rather Shapiro shared that year's Bollingen award with John Berryman. And in the *New York Times* of January 6, 1969, Thomas Lask wrote about Shapiro's life and work:

Shapiro was born in Baltimore, an heir to the social divisions, industrial conflicts and group jealousies of an urban environment. Europe and its dislocations pressed in on all sides.

A member of a minority, he was painfully conscious of what he owed to himself and what he owed those from whom he came. His poetry and criticism are full of value judgments and the search for right values. He made public concern part of his private debates.

... *Selected Poems*, for which he received the award, shows that (Shapiro) is not afraid of contradictions, not afraid to take a stand and that honesty can be a function of courage.

In the above quotes, Thomas Lask is comparing Shapiro to Berryman, which makes for an interesting contrast but it also explains all that emphasis on Shapiro's "value judgments and the search for right values," when Shapiro is seen in comparison with a poet like Berryman of the rhapsodic and querulous Dream songs and Henry poems. Still it seems to me to be a fair statement, that Shapiro does concern himself with values in our time to an extraordinary degree. And I suppose it was that concern with values that led Shapiro into his devastating attack on the work of T. S. Eliot.

That attack is entitled "T. S. Eliot: The Death of Literary Judgment" and it's contained in *The Poetry Wreck*, and it certainly shows that Karl Shapiro is not "afraid to take a stand." In fact, I'd say that this one essay on Eliot is the best, the most conscientious negative criticism of someone that I've ever read. It's better even than Yvor Winters at his bitchiest. Of course, attacks on T. S. Eliot may strike a lot of people today like beating a dead horse, but it's important to remember that Shapiro was one of the only critics to stand up and challenge Eliot's poetry and criticism openly and at the time, and he was also about the only one to challenge Eliot's eminence as the pope of modern poetry. Here is Shapiro on Eliot:

Eliot's poetry all turns to talk. As it goes on through the years it becomes nothing but talk, and talk about the kind of poetry that comes closer and closer to talk.

And here is Shapiro on *The Waste Land*:

Hoax or not, it was very shortly made the sacred cow of modern poetry and the object of more pious literary nonsense than any modern work save the Cantos of Pound. The proof of the failure of the "form" of this poem is that no one has ever been able to proceed from it, including Eliot himself.

I can't think of any critic who says it better and with more plain common sense.

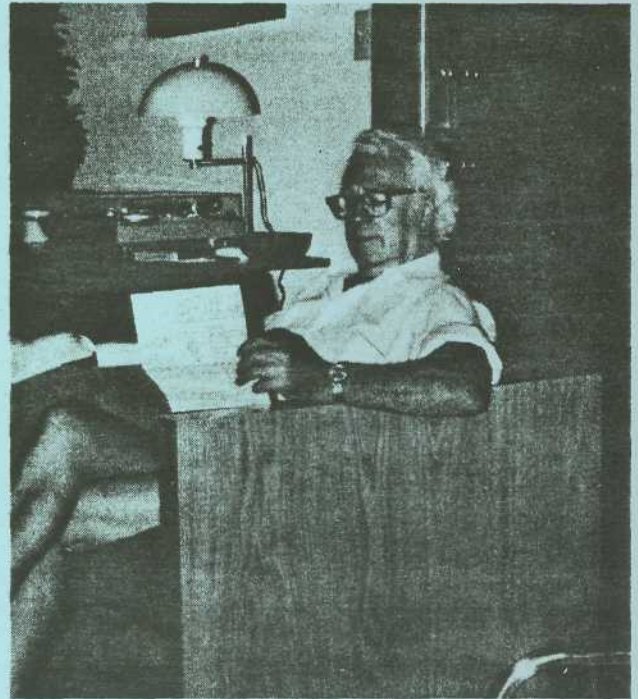
Of course, the best place to see how Karl Shapiro is not "afraid to take a stand" is in his own poetry. The *Collected Poems 1940 - 1978* draws together the major poems from *Person, Place and Thing*; *V - Letter and Other Poems*; *Essay*

On Rime; *Poems of a Jew*; *In Defence of Ignorance*; *The Bourgeois Poet*; and other, later Shapiro volumes.

Early Shapiro is highly formed, metrical and invariably brilliantly rhymed. Shapiro says something fascinating about rhyme in *A Prosody Handbook* in a discussion of rhyme and aesthetic distance:

Rhyme can help a poet get the aesthetic distance he needs in order to write at all of a subject in which he is intimately involved, and which threatens to overwhelm him with paralyzing emotion as he contemplates it and tries to write of it in the most straightforward way.

I'm taking a risk and assuming that Shapiro wrote the above sentence, and not Robert Beum. I'm pretty sure it's Shapiro. It has to be Shapiro, who else would have developed such a psychological predilection for the sanity of rhyme? And for me it's an interesting insight into Shapiro's attitude towards art as a means of holding onto one's lucidity in the face of the "threat" of being "overwhelmed" by "paralyzing emotion?" It helps to remember this when one is reading the great Shapiro poem *The Leg*. This art has come a long way from Wordsworth's quietist recollection of emotion in tranquillity. And yet this insistence on lucidity is



not to be confused with mere technical craft. That becomes clear in an ironic aside in a poem contained in *The Bourgeois Poet*, when Shapiro writes of the experience of writing *A Prosody Handbook*:

Why am I happy writing this textbook? What sublime idiocy! What a waste of time! A textbook on prosody at that. Yet when I'm sitting down to comb the business out, when I address the easel of this task, I burn with an even flame, I'm cooking with gas...

I am a muse of prosody, old hag. She's just a registered nurse, I know, I know, but I have her sashay, grind and bump, register Alcaics, Sapphics, choriambes (my predilection). She's trained all right. She's second nature herself. She knows her job, I mine. We'll work it out: it may be poetry. Blueprints are blue. They have their dreams.

Here again, the chief feature is the lucidity of the craftsman at his task, knowing that craft is only the least aspect of the

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task.

And this is interesting when we realize that Shapiro has always been most deeply wrestling with the question of what the role of the poet is or should be or should not be, in our time. Perhaps because Karl Shapiro has always been one of our most honored and acknowledged and accredited poets. He won a Pulitzer for his second book, he has been Poetry Consultant to the Library of Congress, has been editor of *Poetry* (Chicago), editor of *Prairie Schooner*, won the Bollingen in 1969, is now teaching at the University of California at Davis. Yet for all of this, Shapiro has always seemed to be restless with his laurels, or else wishing he could flip them upside down on his head to see whether they'd look better that way. What a world of difference from the way Eliot worried his laurels! Take a look at the way Shapiro sees Eliot in the following poem. At first glance it may seem to be just a generous tribute for a fellow poet whom Shapiro had already put down so emphatically. But on second reading it becomes a study of a question: who the hell is a poet anyway?

T S E

Coming slowly down the aisle,
Mounting the podium with baronial tread,
Very solemn and slightly stooped,
As if in awe of his stupendous stature,
The responsibility which he has created,
The hush he has summoned,
He carries his poems in two slim volumes,
Holding them lightly in one hand
And touched by the fingers of the other hand,
Sensing rather than carrying his books,
His mythic poetry that has stunned the world.

The real point here is that those laurels weigh so heavily on Eliot's head, and it's a weight that Shapiro himself would never tolerate. He'd rather play Bad Boy, or *provocateur*, or else try skimming the laurels like a frisbee out over the heads of the audience, to see what they'd make of that. Because in our time, who the hell does a poet think he is, anyway? Not just in relation to his age, but in relation to himself? That has to be one of the thorniest problems a real poet can face today. Well, Shapiro gets close to his own answer to the question, in a much earlier poem, a Phi Beta Kappa poem delivered at Harvard University:

Going To School

For in this shaft of light
I dance upon the intellectual crust
Of our own age and hold this make-believe
Like holy-work before your sight.

The problem of who the poet is runs all through Shapiro's work, from the very beginning. Person, Place and Thing — the answer is implicit in the title, a poet is someone who knows he is in a world of nouns. And the poem titles reveal the common and proper nouns of the poet's peculiar experience: Auto Wreck, which is a thrilling encounter with the uncertainty principle; The Fly, which has to rank as one of Shapiro's masterpieces; University; Waitress ("... You arrive, all motion, like a ship"); Buick ("You tack on the curves with parabola speed and a kiss of goodbye"); Mongolian Idiot; and Hollywood, which is Shapiro's scathing portrait of America's whorehouse media culture:

... Here the bodyguard,
The parasite, the scholar are well paid,
The quack erects his alabaster office,
The moron and the genius are enshrined,

And the mystic makes a fortune quietly;
Here are superlatives come true
And beauty is marketed like a basic food.

Nouns and nouns and nouns, and a collective subject matter that is so occasional and unaccountable, with such encyclopedic observation, the poems still ring with an eerie rightness. To say nothing of the rightness of the form, as in these tight lines from "Elegy Written on a Frontporch":

The sun burns on its sultry wick;
Stratus and cumulus unite,
I who am neither well nor sick
Sit in a wicker chair and write.

There is the same lucidity of the poet wondering who the



hell he is, like Li Po getting slightly high on rice wine and wondering what it's all about. And the curiosity and self-consciousness continue on into the next book, and also the nouns continue on, the sense of noun-ness, or what Duns Scotus called "haecceity", the "this-ness" of things.

V-Letter and Other Poems has titles like "Nigger" ("And a penis as loaded and supple and limp as the slaver's whip"); "The Gun"; and "The Leg", that horrifying recreation of lucidity that is trying to keep trauma at arm's length:

He will be thinking, When will I look at it?
And pain, still in the middle distance, will reply,
At what? and he will know it's gone,
O where! and begin to tremble and cry ...

The book contains a poem which is not a noun title but an exclamation of voice:

Lord, I Have Seen Too Much

Lord, I have seen too much for one who sat
In quiet as his window's luminous eye
And puzzled over house and street and sky,
Safe only in the narrowest habitat ...

There is the same lucidity of the poet observing himself in

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the art of poetry, and this lucidity extends **not only** to Shapiro's sense of himself, his Jewishness, his role as soldier, his role as poet, his role as teacher, his role as lover, it extends on into a lucidity about the art which haunts him. In "The Bourgeois Poet" he writes:

I'm writing this poem for someone to see when I'm not looking.
This is an open book. I want to be careful to startle you gently

And there is lucidity about the poet's role in our time, as in these lines from "The Poetry Reading":

Whom the gods love die young. Too late for that,
Too late also to find a different job,
He is condemned to fly from room to room
And, like a parakeet, be beautiful,
Or, like a grasshopper in a grammar school,
Leap for the window that he'll never find,
And take off with a throb and come down blind.

And here is an even more direct comment on himself in "Writer In Exile":

... Well, here I am,
Writer and poet of international reputation,
Ironist, sophisticate and wit
Dreaming of oleanders in the sculpture gardens
And fountains thundering into marble laps,
Equestrian statues of the dear Confederate dead,
The noble bronzes in the brainwashed blue,
I'm out of it with my highbrow jabs at government,
Dirty cracks about the chiefs of staff,
Steel industrialists' wives, all that canaille
Whose favorite word is Honor, the old code word
For guilty...

I think this lucidity, this heightened self-consciousness about himself and his art and his role as an artist in our time, I think this is the chief achievement of Karl Shapiro. More honestly than any American poet I can think of, Karl Shapiro has shown us what it is to have been lionized early, to have been painfully misunderstood so many times, to decide for himself that he has been over-published in *The New Yorker*, and most of all, to have been so thoroughly incapable of going along with all the bullshit that besets modern poetry.

Of course in the process of holding onto that lucidity, he has had to go through some radical transformations in his own life and art. The most famous of these transformations is *The Bourgeois Poet*, and the title itself is a reconsideration of the central question of who the hell a poet thinks he is anyway. The poems themselves, the prose-poems, are an opening out of form, and the supremacy of *voice* in his work, what Baudelaire seemed to achieve so easily as he moved from *Les Fleurs De Mal* to *Paris Spleen*, casual vignettes, prose poems, call them what you will. Here the voice itself veers and reels and is its own inevitable subject matter. Shapiro does it, and he also achieves an easy surrealism, as in "Garrison State":

Today the order goes out: all distant places are to be abolished;
beachcombers are shot like looters. Established poets are
forced to wear beards and bluejeans; they are treated kindly
in bohemian zoos; mysterious stipends drift their way.
They can trade soap for peyote at specified libraries,
Children's prizes are given for essays on the pleasures of
crisis. Historians are awarded all the key posts in the foreign
office. Sculptors who use old shrapnel are made the heads of
schools of design. Highways move underground like veins of ore.
The Anti-Sky Association (volunteer contributions only) meets
naked at high noon and prays for color blindness.

I suppose we can get some final sense of where Shapiro has come in his career, if we listen to where he thinks we have

come. His estimate of contemporary American poetry is worth repeating in full. Here is part of it, from *The Poetry Wreck* essay from the book of the same title. Shapiro says:

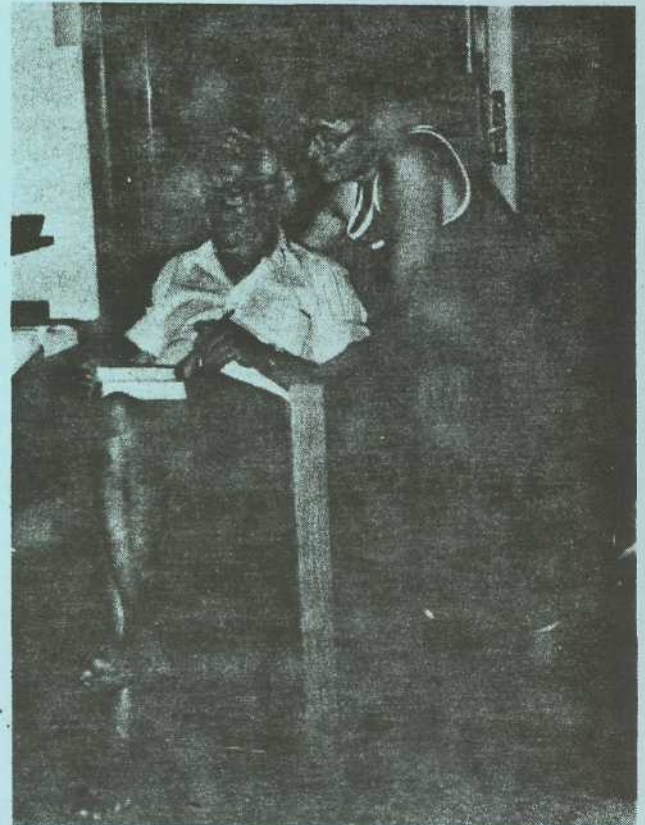
The downhill speed of American poetry in the last decade has been breathtaking, for those who watch the sport. Poetry plunged out of the classics, out of the modern masters, out of all standards, and plopped into the playpen. There we are entertained with the fecal-buccal carnival of the Naughties and the Uglies, who have their own magazines and publishing houses, and the love-lorn alienates, nihilists, disaffiliates who croon or "rock" their way into the legitimate publishing establishment.

These are hard words. But anyone who has anything to do with reading or writing or editing books or magazines or newspapers over the last decade knows there is truth to the hard words. And it's interesting that Karl Shapiro should be the one to blow the whistle on our contemporary scene — Shapiro who has been seen to be so much of a maverick in his own day, ironist, heretic, rebel, a thing to flout. Or perhaps we didn't understand what he was saying?

Okay then, what do we say about everything Karl Shapiro has been saying, in his *Collected Poems 1940 - 1978*, now that we're getting to the end of this overlong book review I didn't want to write in the first place? Well, for one thing, we can't end with a lot of crashing tributes, real laurels in retrospect, what Karl Shapiro himself calls:

... all the trash of praise
which one acquires to prove and prove his days...

Shapiro doesn't need that, has spent a lifetime trying to show that that is not the role of the poet in our time. So then, what? I'll try to say it as simply as I can: I think Karl



Karl and his wife, Teri, at home in Davis, California

Shapiro

Shapiro is of course one of the foremost craftsmen of our time, but that goes without saying, and it's only worth mentioning in case anyone *doesn't* know *The Fly* or *The Leg* or *The Bourgeois Poet*, and so is in for some wonderful encounters, some damn good reading. Beyond all that I think Karl Shapiro is important to us, more than we thought he was, because his chief achievement is an absolute lucidity which he has maintained throughout a lifetime of writing, and what may have seemed at one time to be mischievous irony or recalcitrance or perversity of the literary instinct it becomes clear, is really the most effacing integrity that is possible in an age that has hocked its conscience. Shapiro has maintained his absolute lucidity about himself, about his art, and about his own role as an artist in our time. And in the process he has written some absolutely wonderful poems. And that's what I'm going off to do right now, because I still hate writing book reviews.

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