

POETRY AND DIALOGUE

with **DAVID SHAPIRO and STEPHEN PAUL MILLER**

5 POEMS by DAVID SHAPIRO

PSALM

Lord, I am not too happy.
I am not looking too high.
I am not wasting my time
 on the marvelous, too marvelous for me
my mind is like that quiet child.

Israel, you must hope
now and always.

THE DEAD WILL NOT PRAISE YOU

for Cantor Berele Chagy

My grandfather emerges
in a synagogue
with familiar accents
unlike his noble voice
a pudgy little man
sweet tenor coloratura flautando
He marches down the aisle
with a blue white crown
Women ask questions
and they are charmed
and he is beloved
like etymology
Is my mother in attendance
or is she dead?
What are questions now?
Are the dead permitted: to
sing? Is he serious?
Are the dead permitted
to return and sing?

WILD PSALM

for Michael Govrin

In another world, listening to a Yemenite dump
Dreaming of Jerusalem our popular flesh,
A sleeper whose name is a triple pun
A language where skin would be light.
It all sounds like the king's first love.
But in this world we sit to translate.
God splits and the blind man's reference
Ends like the war ever so quite.
As we forget the grammar we are of red clay, an idiot.
The supplicants approach, on the field of untranslatable force.
Simone says nothing but: Poetry
More difficult than mathematics, as I warned you.
And the old poets, and the books appear themselves,
Holiness in Sin, that enraged Gershom—the doubled books:
And the body's words. Blessed is He who created the creation.
Blessed are they who created the blessing.

WALTER BENJAMIN: A LOST POEM

after a dream

In a lost essay on poetry, Walter Benjamin had written, *I was born into a rich, perhaps too rich and too comfortable existence in Berlin. Each time my family saw soot in the air we wanted to move to another vacation spot. Poetry today withholds too much. What does it withhold. At any rate, eclecticism, Prkofiev...* The most Brechtian poem of Benjamin has almost been forgotten. It was published under the title *David*, with a section of a door knob as a slightly Duchampian topographic oddity. I found the proofs, rare as the Redon for *A Throw of the Dice*, in a bookstore. The poem was fairly simple:

David or King David
How
did you

done
your door

Unfortunately, many of Benjamin's remarks on poetry were now simple scratches on the cover of the book, effaced like the infamous magic writing pad and indecipherable as hidden love (as opposed to open rebuke). Some of his lost short stories appear in this volume. Scholem said, There was nothing like being alone with Walter Benjamin. *It made one want to read.* The source of that remark is also lost.

SARCOPHAGUS FOR THE SILENCE OF GOD

for John Hejduk and Picard

Sarcophagus for the still small voice.

Sarcophagus for the marriage of truth and troth

Sarcophagus for the mother of the hypocritical poet

Sarcophagus for the lava of speech

The incline of music

Sarcophagus for the materials for the messiah without melancholy

Sarcophagus for the misidentified corpse of the architect

Sarcophagus for the flower beyond flowers

Sarcophagus for the suicidal architect for the hand on the edge

Sarcophagus for the powerless computer for the traditional book

Sarcophagus for the one fairy tale

Sarcophagus for the future tense and for the subjunctive in the
gloom

of the miracle for Thomas Hardy's ox-cart man

Sarcophagus for the twins of frozen speech and for the luminous
sounds of the surface

Sarcophagus for the slave of writing crying help in all

languages for wild sound for the twins of frozen speech

Sarcophagus for the mistranslators

5 POEMS by STEPHEN PAUL MILLER

MUDD'S CLUB

a song

Eruch Jessawala says
I'm not a sentimental man,
I'm not an emotional man,
my heart was a rock.

I used to take pride,
a rock can't melt
but a rock can melt
many times.

Hey, over there in Gaza,
is that Meher Baba
wearing a hat?
He was the Sphinx.

CARTER NOTES THE SEALS OF THE NECROPOLIS

Carter notes that the seals of the necropolis
and those of the king have been stamped
into different kinds of paste in Chocolate City.
We mosey into the different modes of Chocolate City,
aware as full we could of Chocolate City.

I can't believe I wrote a poem in Chocolate City.
Me, with my face to the wind, eyes beholding
Happiness, can this alabaster pigment really be?
It calls into play my response to it.
Thank God Egypt's come to Chocolate City.

What a problem it is to accommodate real criticism
of chocolate in Chocolate City. Chocolate City,
When will you examine yourself in such a way
that takes into account the Chocolate City scene?

There's too much money in Chocolate City. The algebraic
Functions should be written right on the money.

Chocolate City needs your help in Chocolate City.
Chocolate City is going down the drain in Chocolate City.
The eternal city is not Chocolate City
but Chocolate City will never be the same.
I love the cherry blossoms in Chocolate City.

SOME PSALMS

1. *Bio*

The commentator's heart skips.
The sea is
shitless.
Rocks do a double-take.
In brief
a lamb opens
the shepherd's gate.

2. *Judaism "Is" the New York School of Poetry*

If the bones
keep putting themselves together,
Jesus isn't the Greco-
Roman god
they say

but push

of the
buoyant nothing,

the NY School Kenneth Koch
keeps together

to be part of.

3. *If Jews*

don't bow, and each
title covers another, *no gods* but
God revolving,
"Psalms" in Hebrew a book of
praise—"hallel"—Halleluiah! fuels
Whitman turning all our
poetry Jewish—even
say "Out of the Cradle..." takes a
running jump to exult like
crazy, and
if every *thing* Halleluiahs
nothing does—
a beautiful point,
no more Temple,
sacrificing animals
there as at the
time of Jesus,
splattering blood on
the wall, now
just wall, a
Jordan redirecting,

or we blowing again.

4. *Glean*

God settles a
biblical
motif fulfilling multitudes
of bets on
an Egyptian
connection lifting us
from our pit to
disconnect
everything upwards.

5. *No Later*

Christianity

subsumes Judaism, Eruch says,
but maybe Jesus is
Judaism naked.

6. *Sun River*

More than erotic,
the whole scarcity rolls
out a lack a
lot like
Lot
and Abraham
arriving in a famine
making Lot
the stingy cousin of stars
finding 2 girls,
daughters-in-law,
the matter in
what's the matter
barley working,
sweet, sweet barley oh God
digs your sacrifice in
all her colors.

7. *The Dove Floats Over The Wall*

On our journey we come to a forked source,
its significance clear—
to dream of reality
is a good sign,
the boy sings
“psalms,” Greek for
plucking the harp, as in Jew's harp, 'n
God's family books
a Spanish airline to Israel—a
dove floats to the wall.

8. *Like a Psalm*

Depressed.

Depressing.
 Exalted.
 Exalting.

Pleasure

Transcription of talk at Secular Jewish Culture/Radical Poetic Practice, Center for Jewish History/American Jewish Historical Society, September 21, 2004

What is Jewish poetry, or,
 at least
one kind of Jewish poetry?

Putting aside all-encompassing definitions and
 tautological-“Jewish-poetry-is-as-Jewish-
 poetry-does”-responses,
I find myself
 examining my own experience,
 asking
 “What sounds Jewish?”
or, more to the point,

“What does ‘Jewishness’ sound like?”

I’m not sure, of course, and thankfully
 there’s no simple answer,
but while driving I entertain
 my 90-year-old ma and
 turn the radio to
 Steve Somers’
Yiddish nuanced sports-talk schtick.
 She immediately
identifies him as Jewish and is happy
(though she cares nothing for sports).

I ask how she
 so quickly
picks up “Jewishness” in his voice
and eventually she theorizes

indefinitely as a
quite distinctive way of reckoning time,
which I mention to my young son
on Rosh Hashanah, when I tell him why
it's 5765. "Do some people still rewind time?" he asks.
And Rosh Hashanah is probably ambiguous
here since the holiday suggests
a movement back to the beginning of creation
to clear space and move forward.

I won't pretend to know anything about Hebrew—
or even Yiddish—
or for that matter
the Aramaic in which Kaddish is chanted,
but I think it's notable that Kaddish
begins in the future tense
anapestically,
constructing motion even
from death:

yisgadol
yiskadosh—

which are reflexive future
third person singular verbs,
so I think they mean something like:

May He magnify Himself.
May He sanctify Himself.

I'm not sure but the point is it's in the future tense
and so is the word Israel, or Yisrael, meaning something
like
He will struggle with God and he will succeed,
suggesting a constantly edgy relation with God.

When I think of a Yiddish accent and the anapest
and a certain Jewish drive, I
think of somehow finding myself chatting
with Jackie Mason on 57th St and 6th Ave.

His last words to me are

It's a PLEASure to TALK to an inTELLigent PERson."

I think this sort of anapest lends itself to a
direction indirection surprise!
...direction indirection surprise!

or

unstress unstress stress

ho hum wow

ho hum wow

rhythm. Rhythm is perhaps a better word
than meter here since when performing Jewish
liturgy

dovening imposes something rhythmic on other possible metric readings,
though it could of course be in the meter of
the text too, and a poem can be enriched by
possibilities of differing meters

in the same passage,

maybe a mark between a good poem and

less good one, between say, "of man's first disobedience" and "once upon a
midnight dreary."

Therefore, I do not mean overly to emphasize the
anapest, or exaggerate its place in the Bible.

The anapest merely indicates, in part through
dovening, a tendency to stress a more
generative and dynamic, rather than referentially
reflective,

poetic m.o. ,

m.o.'s that can accommodate the pace of say

the Marx Brothers' *Duck Soup*

or a Charles Bernstein or David Shapiro poem

In this regard, the Yiddish accent

might owe

something to both

dovening and

biblical poetry,

perhaps more than Hebrew itself.

Hebrew lives so much through poetry

that dovening and what I'll call
the dynamic and parallel structures
of biblical poetry influence Yiddish,
and other languages Jews use, such as English, AND
Ladino, Arabic, Judeo-Persian,
Rumanian, Judeo-Arabic,
Judeo-Italian, Judeo-Provencal,
Judeo-French, Judeo-Greek,
Judeo-Crimean Tatar, and Jewish Neo-Aramaic---
so it makes sense to clarify that my evidence is very
Eastern-Euro-American, and I think it would be cool if
someone looked into some of these other languages for biblical poetic influences
within their respective
literatures.

Robert Alter finds "the structure of biblical poems is
determined not by any substantive impulse of narration, but by a steady
progression of image or theme, a sort of mounting semantic pressure which is to
say a structure of

intensification."

What I say about the anapest
concerns a way to make
dynamic poesis
indicating something like
the intensities and
drives
of biblical poetry as Alter characterizes it
more than valuing
any particular meter,

more of a twin phenomenon with
breaking the back of iambic pentameter
then replacing it with another meter,

perhaps relating the new ethnicities
of modern America with modern poetry,

perhaps something "other." Eliot after all says he needs
Paris, a mix of English and not English.

to write "Prufrock."

While vetting this paper with a friend who probably experiences Judaism much more directly than me, she says

Kaddish for her is its trance-like rhythm, chanting with extremely flat intonation with a fairly even if at times anapestic delivery.

. For her (Ilana Abramowitz), the meter seems part of a bigger linguistic *dynamic*.

Maybe I shouldn't,

but I think of Eliot's flat rhythmic quality.

In her *21st Century Modernism* book, Marjorie Perloff talks of

how

important Eliot and Pound are in promoting "generative" and dynamic poetic models.

Frankly, I haven't been drawn to Eliot and Pound since I was a teenager.

Seeming rigidities and pretensions in their dictions, and their differing brands of anti-Semitic and fascistic leanings

make them uncongenial as discursive influences and yet my teen attraction seems valid.

They are important to what poetry now is.

I find their ambivalence toward

Whitman

instructive here. Whitman uses the Bible's parallel structures to portray American diversity. I use the plural, "structures," since there are many different kinds of parallel structures using all manner of syntactic semantic, and other linguistic constants highlighting changes within a fixed structure.

In a sense, Whitman
remakes modern poetry
in a Jewish tradition,
and renders this influence

unavoidable thereafter.

Certainly Eliot and Pound take parallelism in more odd, syncopated directions, using different parallelisms and intensities as the Bible sometimes does. Note "Prufrock" repeating "let us" to initiate—
"Let us go then, you and I" —
and respond—

"Do not ask 'what is it?' Let us go..."

And each time Pound's *Canto 45* repeats "with Usura" it refers to both Usura's previous and following examples.

This kind of dynamic is used in JOB (where, for example, "do you know?" parallels other "do you" questions: "Do you know the time when the mountain goat gives birth,/ do you mark the birth pangs of the gazelles? / Do you number the months till they come to term? / Do you know the time when they give birth?" Check out the Bible and the *Cantos* for more complex interactions among parallel structures. Similar modes are available to Pound and Eliot in poetic devices such as the villanelle and sestina, and in musical forms, (and the use of these sources in itself demonstrates a push to the "something else" of modern poetry) but, in terms of epic sweeps generating throughout entire poems, Whitman and biblical poetry cannot be ignored.

I can't say on what level Eliot and Pound adapt a
Jewish model of poetry
but perhaps it's
difficult to avoid,
especially
after Whitman unleashes it.

And, obviously being subjective,
Eliot and Pound sometimes seem
more Jewish than Whitman.

Well, sometimes anyway.

A secular Jewish poet like Kenneth Koch bases his work in parallel structures *and* a sense of intensity *and* a relentless sense of ongoing discourse.

By ongoing discourse, I mean talk

flowing to and fro like dovening yet also
hurtling

seemingly endlessly forward.

Perhaps parallelism, discourse, and intensity
are related hallmarks of

something like Jewish poetry. Its parallelisms and intensities dovetail with
argumentative, narrative,
and/or referentially abstract, linguistically
reflexive

poetry that, as Duke Ellington puts it, swings. Ellington, backstage, wearing
sleepwear plus a Bowler, once signed my *Confucian Odes* Pound translation

near where it says “the Duke rings true”
and also close to words to the effect of

“everything comes to the Duke”
(though not exactly those words)

and around 1930 James Weldon Johnson says

Jews only among white folk can sing
black, and from the Andrews sisters
to Andy Statman, Klezmer and jazz
rhythms and melodies

blend easily. Lenny Bruce,
living perhaps in a more innocent time
says black people are, after all, Jewish.
David Antin is Jewish, but Spalding Gray
said he considered himself Jewish too. He might not sound Jewish though he
composes that way through ongoing discourse. Maybe his neurosis helps.
The generative feature I’m describing might not
dominate all Jewish poetry, but

describes some I like.

Perhaps Jewish poetry is concrete and
probing, like the anti-fascism as strong as

fascism that Benjamin tells Brecht he feels taking shape within him—odd to say when speaking of Eliot and Pound, but I'm not saying there aren't other workings in both, and perhaps that's why their obscurities and rigidities sometimes seem out of place.

One might expect a healthy dose of skepticism from Jewish poets Pound influences, and skepticism isn't totally unrelated to the poets we associate with Objectivism, so many of whom are secular Jews. Zukovsky and other so-called Objectivists desire oddly externalized sincerity virtually embedded in words. Also suggesting her preference for the real and sensory, my mother often says she's from Missouri. I wish she could vote there (It's a swing state). Objectivism might have something to do with what for me is Theodore Herzl's most compelling reason for a Jewish state—and of course I'm talkin' a century ago—and for me the reason the United States at its best might be a secular Jewish state, that is, a state in which Dreyfus would theoretically get a fair shake and the truth get direct presentation. (The French right never acknowledge the persuasive case for Dreyfus. You'd think the truth would be more convincing. Or at least entertainable. What am I blocking?) Of course a direct presentation's difficult to achieve, but the desire's real and sheds light on how Objectivism paradoxically also involves subjective qualities such as sincerity when verbally constructed. Note Jerome Rothenberg's "Poland/1931": "if there are men who ride the train to lodz/ there are still jews/ just as there are still oranges/ & jars/ there is still someone to write the Jewish poem—others to write their mothers names in light." Norman Finkelstein says

“Poland/1931” is distinctively “Jewish” because it is as “objective in its identity as a jar or an orange, an

utterance...circulating,”

making me think of God promising

Jacob a home as He tells him

of perpetual Diaspora.

The Jewish imagination is not necessarily

grounded in a nation; Jewish poetry

needn't be by Jews, and Jewish poetic

imagination isn't limited to poetry.

Much of Harold Bloom's fierce rap starts

with the *Kabbalah* but, in a less overtly Jewish

fashion, the urge to stress language and experience what makes us see language-as-language as poetry is central in Roman Jakobson's work; knowing cultures as

languages is

of course advanced by Claude Lévi-Strauss,

and Derrida makes clear that language is

more than anything else a generative if painstaking “sense

of itself.”

That perhaps the preeminent Formalist,

founding “Structuralist,” and most philosophically

influential “Post-Structuralist” are secular Jews

suggests, as secular Jews, they

extend a

close attention characteristic of traditional Jewish scholars

to secular texts that

magnify

our sense of what texts

can be. Similarly, secular Jewish figures

such as Lenny Bruce and Bob Dylan and, hey, my son just asked if Simon and

Garfunkel are two people, and I don't know, Rodgers and Hammerstein and

Einstein and

Irving Berlin and Lerner and Lowe—okay,

forget Lerner and Lowe, not because they're not Jewish, no, I like them, and I

think they're Jewish—secular Jewish figures s t r e t c h

linguistic, critical, and poetic substance

through swinging yet solid dynamically

generative spiels.

DUNK

for the Tel Aviv University English Department
December 29, 2005

Tell me when
you don't get,
want to add or
ask something.

Does GET mean "understanding" to
you? Am I using too many American idioms?

Feel free to interrupt. I want to be accessible.
I'm millers@stjohns.edu.

Professor Karen Alkalay-Gut suggests
I take up the idea of the "poet-critic" to
introduce
my poetry
so why not use a poem—
this one, "Dunk,"
to set itself up? But,

first, dunking's dipping a
ball in
a basket from above. Second,
there's no one
way of defining
"poet-critic" since it
can mean
poet as art critic,
poet as academic critic,
poetic critic, discursive poet,
or simply someone both poet and critic,
yet

I steer clear of these meanings,
telling the committee evaluating my promotion
I mix poetry with criticism.

A historian of Chinese culture and literature asks,

“I accept your poetry
as cultural criticism,
but why
is it poetry?”

“Attention to language,” I
say but screw it,
do I wanna be a poet?

Poetry’s the only thing duller than criticism.

After a reading someone tells my poet friend Ken Deifik,
“I don’t like poetry, but I like what you do,” and
in this spirit I take the historian’s query as a
terribly high
compliment. Okay, the committee’s
confidential but thank
you, thank you Professor Kinkley!!! I owe you forever!
This poem’s not poetry at all cuz

do I contradict myself?
No!!! I make sense!

Am I a
poet-critic or what?!

But no—poetry derails criticism and poet-critics
choose
the absorbent mess, says Charles Bernstein, over
falsely reflective, “neat” criticism—
po-crit recontextualizes non-stop, blotting
out criticism, so I’m one

shmegege poet-critic
even if philosophy doctors dunk.

“You don’t look like you jam.”

Here's how I do it.

God is a line...one very long thin line with millions
of colors twisting and turning into
shapes.

Getting a doctorate
makes
you feel like a doctor,
THE DOCTOR,
Julius Winfield Erving III,
Julius Erving,
Dr. J
(simply
"Doctor"),
extemporaneous behind-the-back-finger-
roll-reverse-bank-shot-genius, first to
fly free-throw-line-to-hoop and dunk (or "stuff") the
ball through the net's metaphoric ocean.
A New York Net, (before the team's
Jersey diaspora),
a Net,
Dr. J
realizes his object
of consciousness through
himself much as

God is a line through Him or Herself. Also, in this
fantasy,

Sade dubs me "Smooth Operator,"
"Diamond Doctor with all the lines," a
doctor of doctoring. Operatively tying John Ashbery to
Nixon's Oval Office through the self-surveillance device of
the convex mirror, my dissertation gives meaning,
its play a real thing,

like

the play as real thing,

meaning spritzer-DUNKer.

“No one agrees with you,” a prof once tells
me on a job search
after I spritz in the boonies ‘n return with
John’s first interview choice.
“I’m a voice in the wilderness,” I
say to that prof. “Oy!” he moans.

—Anyway—

I doven for the St. John’s University-wide committee, the
next committee.

No, really, the candidate for promotion
gives a little speech:

“the works of Wordsworth
and Coleridge, Keats’s
letters, Emerson’s visions
of a new and organic
poetry, Whitman’s prefaces,
Pater’s impressionism, the poetry
and criticism of Matthew Arnold and T.S. Eliot, and all
the movements of modernism, with their various
rationales,
in which the formation of taste
and reception of strange or
difficult
work in part’s the
poet-critic’s project,
harmonize
with the St. John’s University Mission Statement’s
call to merge ‘imagination’ with ‘research’” and so on.

Okay, I’m no expert,
any
more than
knowing
poetry and criticism interact. (Intersect? Or are
they inextricable—I mean

right from the get go?)

The term “poet-critic” I associate
with New York School Poets like Frank
O’Hara, John

Ashbery, David Shapiro, James
Schuyler, Peter Schjeldahl, and so on,
all poets *and* art
critics, but

when my cultural criticism’s blurbed
“radical poetry-criticism”

I suss out how
poets like Charles Bernstein use the term
“poetry-criticism.”

I give Charles credit for what my
blah blah blah talk to the university committee calls
“the re-emergence of the poet-critic.”

In essays like “The Revenge of the Poet-Critic...” —
shouldn’t it be “Return of the Poet-Critic...”?
don’t poet-critics have Jedi qualities? —
Charles shows criticism needs
poetry’s upsets and

alluding to work like Charles’s
the poet

and critic

and poet-critic

Susan M. Schultz

speaks of poetry-criticism

as negotiating

silence with language.

I think of it as Charles
being better than me.

I *had* to get a Ph.D.

Someone, *New York Times* art critic William Zimmer,
tells

me if you get a Ph.D. you can get a job. Is that true?
Don’t Ph.D.s drive cabs? No, he says,
I can get a job. So I get a Ph.D. Thanks, Bill.

But Charles didn't *have to* get a Ph.D. He gets hired to teach literature based on expertise his poetry provides. He's a REAL poet-critic.

They hire me as
mere
critic.

But I can
dunk.

"Dunk"
probably should touch on
if not get lost in
"What makes me, as 'Dunk,' a poem?" I say,
"ease of and attention to language combined with
the rhetorical question,
'Why isn't this an f-ing poem?' shifting
the burden of proof,
as when Thoreau
shifts
power relations between
individual and state,

and national security's
not at stake here,
so let's shift."

Is this a lecture, a poem, both, or neither?

Am I in the po-crit zone?
It's so nice to be here with you.
I thought poetry senseless
since it's so full
you can't reduce it to understanding—
"Love hath reason, reason none," Shakespeare notes,
and Meher Baba points out,
"Understanding has no meaning. Love has meaning....Holding
on most meaning"

so

poetry's full and empty of sense.

My best poetry's meaningless,
though,
and even when I believe that
I'm driven
to *explain*—an
urge
part and parcel of my early poems.
Explanation joins fullness

as in a painter's mark

in the sense

Franz Kline and Barnett Newman say
marks are truly background,
background foreground,
because background's the real marking (or writing) utensil.

A simple statement forms a world of poetry-criticism

much like an abstract
painter jamming,
crossing over to paint "things" then
stressing visual or
conceptual components
conspicuous through supposed absence.

Think of a relatively young Andy
Warhol assuming real art messily indecipherable and playing
with his now iconic imagery. His soup cans drip paint.

Lose
the drips,
documentary filmmaker Emile D'Antonio advices.

Similarly, I'm just coming

from a Jill Magi poetry reading
where Jill
explains her poetry
as part of what radically
political
sociologist C. Wright Mills calls
the “sociological imagination” — a sense of
yourself as hanging on culture, like painting
with background, so

I expect Jill’s “sociological poetry,” as
she calls it, to talk,
but it’s interpretively resistant—
a kind of “full” sociological datum.
Jill correctly—I surmise—sees poetry
as full and definitely not dominated
by reference or meaning,

but isn’t meaning part of the whole poem’s pie?

Can’t poetry do the work of criticism?

And discourse poetry, upsetting poetry’s too neat world?

Discourse is so beautiful and fictive after all.

“God is a line with millions of colors.”

So, if light moves in waves, and discourse literally
means “away
runs” like river water from bank to bank,
is “discursive poetry” more apt than po-crit?
I don’t love the term “poetry-criticism”
cuz “criticism” is from the Greek
“to separate”
but no I like poetry-criticism
better
than discursive poetry
because what’s a line but
a separator, a cutter of space, so to

speaking, cutting actual from potential.

Yes. Right. Poetry-criticism's the bomb,
counter to the "M.F.A. McPoem"
but
frankly I begin thinking of
poetry-criticism
as something tying
me to the projects of
other living poets and critics

when I apply for "full professor," what
American professors tend to try for
five to ten years after
tenure,
which is far more nervous-making
than going for full-of-it professor
since the tenure decision means "up or out,"
staying "forever" or splitting—getting fired
or seemingly staying for long as you want—
so applying for tenure I don't mention poetry.

Me hard-core critic.

Charles's poems get him better and better jobs
but mine can get me fired

though in the full professor process—it not being
life/death—I own up
to my poetry.

Tenure in America
usually comes with
promotion from assistant
professor, your usual rank when hired,
to associate professor.

Tenure's other-wordly.
You reincarnate with it,

but promotion to full professor's a slight
raise, seeming end to scrutinizing your *entire* life, and
more status, which gets you on the subway with \$2
but also makes it harder to be hired elsewhere
without being a superstar full professor.

Tenure freezes you to your plantation. C.

Wright Mills says he needs to write his way out
of O-klahoma.

In my full professor promotion process, poetry-criticism's
a rubric or heading under which to list both
significant sizzling critical feats and
distinguished Kong-like poetic features.
Aristotle, after all, says poetry compares
incomparable things, and as a poet who is a critic
everything I do I do for something like
"poetry-criticism" —hence, I've ten meters of poetry success and
ten of critical success
so when Ms. Poetry-Criticism fastens
these two poles my accomplishments
reach twenty meters—
ten whole meters longer!

At St. John's U
the only difference between
associate and full professor requirements is
an associate professor's achievements
must be "significant" while
a full professor's should be "distinguished"
so my poetry might *distinguish* my
significant research! I
synthesize
cultural criticism with poetry, I tell them, and
can I be the only one playing these games?

Kenneth Koch's the first major New York School poet
with a Ph.D.—New York School poet
and lyricist Kenward Elmslie
tells me Kenneth is the one
who pushes the term New York School

and wants that kind of togetherness
so, in a manner of speaking, origin of the term
New York School poet aside, Kenneth Koch is the first one

though he isn't an art critic
as much as he hangs with artists
and sees poetry as the object of
an artistic kind of contemplation,

and, in this regard,

near New Year's 1987,

Kenneth Koch tells me it's important
not to care about your dissertation topic.

His topic's incredibly insignificant—

I certainly can't remember it,

something about very, very old French literature, I think—
the idea's I guess not

to get too

attached to academic thought and
criticism, why

some people dodge Ph.D.s.

I've a feeling John Ashbery accidentally
on purpose doesn't finish his.

He doesn't need to.

T.S. Eliot simply doesn't hand in
his dissertation—he's conveniently
in Europe and can't since
working in a bank would be hard
with a Ph.D.

All these people are better than me
and can get all kinds of jobs
without doctorates.

Kenneth Koch might need one
but minimizes the accomplishment.

Ashbery says he can never use a word

without thinking he could've used another
(note to self—relate this to Saussure's
notions of linguistic stock and utterance—
to what a student might
be thinking of saying and not
saying in class—
hey, my spring Literature and Culture class
can be a poem!), and
re Ashbery never quite having the right word,
once you've a Ph.D.
you can't give it back,
if that makes any sense. In other words,

a Ph.D. sets you in
a way you mightn't like.

But I want to go where no academic has
gone before—
the idea
behind a dissertation—
to stretch the limits of the discipline—

to dunk in such a way the whole world outside the basket scores,

everything poetry except maybe poetry.

Before this talk I avoid
discussing poetry in poetry-criticism and

think of the genre
as a way to write about anything else
as when Andy Warhol tells
his actors to talk about anything but the camera.

May I address the sociology department?

How long can you focus on your focus
for others to focus?

asks George Tenet.

Real slam-dunks

bring peace.

In Jerusalem—meaning

“peace’s platform,”

maybe implying the infinite consciousness

and zero knowledge (or vice versa) of rocks,

you rock on a very high level—the city’s slab dunk reverberates

stone love from the future,

but I prefer Tel Aviv, New York, whatever. I mean

I get Kenneth Koch.

I wanted to write a boring dissertation

but that takes talent

so I figure how we

go from the 60s

to Reagan, and

a year after my book’s

out

David Frum

makes the shift *positive*,

turning my argument Neocon.

Then Frum slips

GW Bush the term “axis of evil,”

I think somewhat self-reflexively.

Forget poetry, reflexivity echoes what you mean.

Thank youuuuuuuuu....

Are there any questionsssss...

question mark mark mark

INTERVIEW WITH ST. JOHN'S UNIVERSITY WORKSHOP - SPRING 2007

ST. JOHN'S: For both of you: To what extent, if at all, is the Hebrew alphabet an influence on your poetry?

STEPHEN: Nothing overt, but that's probably the point, for me, the Hebrew alphabet is structural growth.

DAVID: I own a rubber stamp book of the Hebrew alphabet. Yes, learning Hebrew was significant to me. My mother taught me for early years, also I keep the Hebrew Bible on my desk since age 3. Hebrew and Chinese and Greek and Latin are my true homes. I know some of Tanak by heart in Hebrew. I am also teaching at Cooper Union, and one of my visiting lectures was by Govrin on the sound-shape as it were of letters. She has also lectured my architects there on Jerusalem as text first, then city. I am, of course,, obsessed by Rimbaud's quest, and Wittgenstein early for a perfect and unfallen language, a topic of Milton and so many.

ST. JOHN'S: To what extent is the historical background of a canonical Psalm a factor in your imaginative construal of it?

STEPHEN: I'm not sure. I was inspired by the notion of a confusion or space or interaction between song and instrument.

DAVID: Congregation, Testimony, and Genesis believe constantly in the historical recuperation of the Bible. I believe that that is interesting but must be approached with endless subtlety and humility.

A tremendous amount of guess-work invades the seemingly empirical studies. I am interested and skeptical about much "form criticism" and J as woman, etc. But reading is endless, like humility. I exclude no readings if fruitful, as Sir Ed. Leach told me in Cambridge. I try to study all the Fathers, from Jewish to Christian, Buddhist also and Hindu and Confucian. I am indeed that terrible thing, not a relativist, but a pluralist. I lack the purity of Monism. But my Jewishness is something I am willing to die for and live for. I hate hate. (Hitler must not be granted a posthumous victory, says Emil Fackenheim.) See an updated version of D. Hofstadter's Godel, Escher, Bach.

ST. JOHN'S: To what extent do you see an exercise like this interdisciplinary conversation as part of what Hofstadter is promoting?

STEPHEN: Self-reference is generative but certain closed systems of self-reference are poisonous.

DAVID: For a long time, I was a kind of Russian formalist, a New York School poet who wrote on self-reflexiveness always. I also went through a period of

despising aspects of any theory that was naturalist. I believed that poetry should and could and may be about itself: Agreed that Hofstadter is a bit vulgar throughout, but much of my belief is in congruence. I too worship Bach fugues and play them. Palpability in Jakobson's sense is the bachelorhood of the word. However, as I grow old, I am used to being open to many imperfect languages and am even intrigued, as with Fairfield Porter's landscapes that are also abstract. I am, I would say, a pluralist and believe in plural perspectives.

We alone do not create the world, not even Kant does that. There is a strange gap between us and the world, as Kafka suggests, like that of a dog to a master. We do not understand, but we continue. There are many Jewish jokes about this kind of work. "We do not live, we do not exactly die, we wear out, says a man who has lost money even in a store selling bread and shrouds, seemingly the two permanent poles of our condition. In Yiddish the idea of wearing out is poignant and laughing: Meyer Schapiro uses this joke to inspect generously the sculpture of George Segal.

George believes in ordinary flesh, as he put it to me. I also however reserve the William Jamesian right to inspect miracles, even if I don't end up believing in one. A good poem or fugue or self-reflexive joy is miracle enough for me most of the time.

Ruth Wisse's 'The Modern Jewish Canon' chronicles the fate of Yiddish literature in the last century. Do you want to weigh in on that issue, especially as regards poetry?

STEPHEN: I wish my parents taught me Yiddish. I wish Israel valued it more. But nonetheless I think Yiddish has a great effect on English. To paraphrase Singer, it seems to provide linguistic vitamins.

DAVID: A constant medley of Yiddish songs. I have infinite nostalgia for Yiddish and on the other hand I am not a scholar of Yiddish, but I believe in it. (I shared a party once with Singer and am a friend of his biographer Richard Burgin. David Schiff my accompanist was also the composer of "Gimpel the Fool"). Yiddish is vast, but I would urge anyone to try to listen to my grandfather's Yiddish folk songs. They are as beautiful as anything in Montero or Piaf. Every language that dies, like Yiddish in part, makes us suffer a catastrophic loss, like a brick-layer falling from the Tower of Babel. I say somewhere It is not our custom to pray in the direction of the Tower of Babel, and yet, like Steiner, I do stand in wonder of linguistic multiplicity and I don't think it's trivial as datum.

ST. JOHN'S: David Hart's 'The Beauty of the Infinite: An Aesthetics of Christian Truth' is an exploration in the spirit of Gregory of Nyssa of the unbounded nature of the triune God's life and its attendant beauty. To what extent are you inspired by philosophical studies of beauty?

STEPHEN: I grew up in an age when beauty was questioned. I thought Brittany looked pretty bald. I just scribbled this before I got your email:

What is poetry? Sparkle,
Today Iran's president
said he was willing
to discuss the issue
as long as there are
no preconditions.
Everyone's toning their rhetoric.
Small is exuberant beauty.

The last line combines Blake's exuberance is beauty and the Swedish ecologist's small is beautiful. I don't know. I guess things are beautiful because they work on some profound level that paradoxically fosters freedom and irregularity.

DAVID: Throughout my life, as in my anthology *Uncontrollable Beauty* (Allport), I have been lit up by the radiance of a tradition of philosophy. My own Uncle was a student of Russell and Whitehead, of Carnap and others. I learned the idea of philosophy at my mother's knees. My family was constantly arguing about politics, philosophy, and aesthetics. I cannot think of my early theology without thinking of Nietzsche's savage influence on me at age 12-13. I cannot think of my early adolescence without thinking of how Spinoza rescued God's radiance for me: *deus sive natura*. I have learned by thinking and by knowing thinkers. Jacques Derrida wrote a book with me on prayer.

I have been influenced perhaps the most by Meyer Schapiro's aesthetics and their derivation from, Dewey and thus from William James. Meyer is a Jewish pluralist and he loved Israel and the idea of Israel. He wrote especially on neglected things, for example Israeli Mosaics. My tradition comes out of what is regarded as the void of Jewish theology.

Not true: Maimonides Nachmanides and others in our century like Benjamin Scholem and others remain.

Rosenzweig. Freud. My behavior in philosophy comes out of an immense collage of enlightenment and criticism of enlightenment. I am probably closest to Benjamin of all readers in our century. I admire him for his poetics of the particular and for his immense' recuperations of the surrealist in Baudelaire.

For David in particular: Re your Jonah poem in Chapters into Verse: Your last lines reminded me of the green imagery in "Grass", by James Merrill. Is that a coincidence?

DAVID: My Jonah poem, which I sometimes hardly recall, is another failed attempt to create a modern poetry that comes to terms with a canonic story. Merrill I knew; he gave me an award to translate; but I have consistently felt shutout of his poetry due to his too-golden voice, at least for me too much vibrato. I'm sorry to say that my poem was influenced by exoticism in travel, and by the complexity of the story. Lopate told me he found Jonah impossible as a story and cruel God abounding. I said to him, But isn't that like "real life." What I meant was that the journey to Nineveh and trying to get out of it seem immensely human to me. The part I was trying to end with was the strange forgiveness, the story of the green and protective tree, it's looking forward to the mercy of Jesus, and to the whole idea of the architecture of chaos. I told John Cage the story was based on chance: the throwing of the lots. For Stephen: Would you give brief blurbs on some of the figures and forms named; e.g. Benjamin and villanelle? Hearing you do that may help open a window into their function in a given place.

STEPHEN: David might want to talk about Benjamin. I'd Google him for details, but I love Benjamin because his criticism is an object of pleasure for him.

Benjamin is very much a secular Jew, but in an oddly religious way because the world as profanely sacred text is his contemplative object of pleasure.

I HAVE TO refresh myself on the villanelle form. Here's one I wrote in the 70s:

BIGGER THAN WATERGATE

Similar operations go the route
When we need money we put
 ourselves through the change
Into a lifetime of stream-
 lined living.

They had only one machine
 to take care of themselves,
In the house across the street
Similar operations go the route

Into a lifetime of stream-
 lined living
I was one of your
 regular customers
You knew me by my
 feed

The strangest sense of
 which came afterwards

As a copy of a copy
Into a lifetime of stream-
lined living

He stuck his foot out
As a big job was done
for his customer
Similar operations went
the route

Playing the part of a minimal
copy job was a master charge
Unstamped, unwept
Similar operations go the route
Into a lifetime of stream-
lined living.

POETRY IN RESPONSE TO DAVID SHAPIRO

AFTER SHAPIRO, RELIGIOUS POEMS
by LAURA CAMERLENGO

I am faithless.
For poetry is prayer.

HOLLY'S SONG
by HOLLY DELANEY-WADE

In the name of the poet, the words, and the reader amen.

Hail Gertrude full of grace
Alice is with thee
Our Allen who art in heaven
Hallowed be thy words
Bless me Kerouac
For I am beat and only Diane can save me
From the indulgences.
Amim.

* * * * *

My beloved David
Slingshots are eight-tracks
Of my tears

Are you satisfied
With your promises, promises, promises
Of peace, peace, peace.

Jesus falls for the third time
As a distant relative
Feels intimately (dis)connected
To the weight of it all.
Munda cor meum ac labia mea
For ever and ever.

Cleanse my heart and my lips
Per omnia saecula saeculorum.

DANE'S SONG
by DANE VARRIANO

Not everyone follows Jesus.
Each Comma Refers to the One Before It

by KATHLEEN PESCE

David, Lot, Peter, Judas

LIGHT
by ALEXSYS ECHEVARRIA

Footprints captured in Sand

Assignment three or four 3 or 4
By Nicole Della Bella

"I'm involved in the art of nonsense"
"But, that makes no sense"
"Precisely, my job here is done."

POEM
by ALISON CUNNINGHAM

Cry for help
Cry in shambles
A shadow of myself
You're deaf

Cold,
Unyielding
Can anyone hear me?
I need help
No one looks up
Should I look down too?
I care.

POEM TO...
by DAVAN FERRERI

hey i'm dana and this is me...
it rained on my head when i was a baby
i ate tiny crackers by seven
i was put in place in second grade
i lathered up for the sun before high school
its said i'm supposed to take a stroll down the avenue of commitment
although that's not for me...
i do know one thing
my ending is a happily
ever
after.

POEM
by LAURA CAMERLENGO

To Be or Not to Be

I would address my poetry to God,
If I could be sure that there was one above.
Too, I am faithless.

For poetry is prayer.

God would then read each
Syllable, letter, word,
And respond clearly, concisely.

But, as I cannot be sure,
I write for myself.