

POETRY & ME

Poetry and me... what can I say? It's been a very long engagement. I produced my first poem in 1956, when I was four years old. My father quickly scribbled it down on a cardboard key card, as he was leaving for work. The verses were a little ditty addressed to him, the theme of which was that *play* is more important than *work*. I'd forgotten about this early composition, until my mother sent it to me in the mail, 50 years later.

Since then, my life with poetry has been more like several lives; difficult for me to summarize. So in a slapdash way I will try to do so, under three headings which seem most important.

1. The Russian Influence. In the early 1980s I chanced upon a volume of Russian poet Osip Mandelstam's work in translation, and felt an immediate joyful crush for these mysterious poems. This was the beginning of a long fascination with Mandelstam and other 20th-cent. poets associated with him (the "Acmeist" school of St. Petersburg). At the time I was, shall we say, "recovering" from a personal and spiritual crisis, which had caused me to abandon writing and literature altogether. Mandelstam's poetry, and the biography written by his wife Nadezhda (*Hope Against Hope*), were life-changing: they helped re-integrate my sense of myself as a poet (or possible poet) with what had become more basic and central spiritual concerns. Underlying all this, however, was an affinity for Mandelstam's mysterious, elliptical style: the poems were beautiful riddles, filled with hypnotic and obscure imagery. This quality has always appealed to me, and thanks to Mandelstam I discovered parallels in English and American poetry (particularly Wallace Stevens and Hart Crane).
2. The Long Poem. I've always been a big reader of history books. This might be one reason I've been drawn to the epic dimension of poetry. Sometime in the mid-1980s I began to immerse myself in the sub-genre of the "American long poem" - *The Bridge*, *The Cantos*, *Paterson*, *The Dream Songs*, *The Maximus Poems*, "A", and others. Another motive for me, perhaps, has been the impact of the Bible, which is an amalgam of poetry and chronicle. One of the characteristics of the Russian Acmeists is their "classicism" - their devotion to the living quality, the contemporaneity, of ancient poets and texts. Poetry is a hologram of cultural memory. I'm fascinated with the *agon* between the Moderns and Ancients - that is, by the challenge of writing a contemporary poetry which in any way compares to the tremendous literary monuments of the past. The aspirations of the writers of the 20th-century long poem were caught up in these challenges. And every long poem represents a worldview, a philosophical perspective, a stance toward life. So part of my own endeavor has been to *reconfigure* the long poem. To a degree, I issue a challenge to the poetic vision of history as presented by Eliot, Pound, Crane, Olson, Williams, Berryman, Zukofsky, et al. I want to draw a slightly different picture. In the course of the last 30 years I've written 8 or 9 long poems (one of them *extremely* long - over 600 pages). (Brief excerpts from my current project, called *Ravenna Diagram*, are published in the latest issue of Notre Dame Review.)

3. The Spiritual Dimension. As mentioned above, in the early 1970s, in my college days - at a time when I was engaged with poetry in quite a different mode, as a would-be “New York School” poet - I underwent a kind of spiritual/psychological crisis. Since that time - over a period of at least 40 years - my involvement with poetry has meant a kind of tentative, off-&-on exploration of the mystery of faith and religion. Perhaps you could call this the philosophical dimension (if it deserves such a high-minded phrase). I’m trying to describe things in poetry as if seen for the first time - my poems are like primitive drawings on the cave-wall, sketches or gestures toward something that keeps eluding my grasp. In this I lean on a certain aptitude for improvisation - the leap in the dark. Whether this leads to enlightenment, or only obscurantism, others will have to judge. Improvisation goes along with self-discipline as parts of a whole, the ecstatic play of art.

For many years I’ve maintained a gaseous and verbose blog called *HG Poetics* (hgpoetics.blogspot.com). There you can find much more of my poetry, and thoughts about it. You can also find some YouTube videos linked there, of me reading parts of another long poem called *Lanthanum*. And I’ve collected some of my book reviews and essays on a blog called *HG Essays+Reviews* (hgesrev.blogspot.com). There you will find links to essays published in the *Critical Flame* and other online magazines. Kent Johnson conducted a lengthy interview with me about 15 years ago, which appeared in the magazine *Jacket* (<http://jacketmagazine.com/10/johnson-iv-gould.html>).