

FOREWORD

by David Lehman

Susan Wheeler was telling me about the writing workshop she took as a Bennington College undergraduate in the 1970s. On the first day Alvin Feinman, who taught the class, asked the students to bring in their favorite poems. Some fulfilled the assignment with approved masterworks on the order of “East Coker” or the *Duino Elegies*. Wheeler chose Karl Shapiro’s “Buick,” a “shorter, speedy poem” that seemed “inconsequential” next to the weighty works of Eliot or Rilke. I like this anecdote not only because it makes its point about not going with the flow but because in my student days I, too, had an intense experience with this now neglected poet’s rhapsodic ode to his car. It expressed something real and otherwise overlooked in metrically rich verse:

As a sloop with a sweep of immaculate wing on her
delicate spine
And a keel as steel as a root that holds in the sea as
she leans,
Leaning and laughing, my warm-hearted beauty,
you ride, you ride.

Karl Shapiro, who died in May 2000 at the age of eighty-six, wrote other poems imbued with the aura of the 1940s. He portrays American institutions in

“Haircut” (“In mirrors of marble and silver I see us forever”), “Drug Store” (“They slump in booths like rags, not even drunk”), and “University” (“To hurt the Negro and avoid the Jew / Is the curriculum”). Some of his most admired works bear witness to the casualties of World War II, in which he served. The amputee “will begin to cry as a child cries / Whose puppy is mangled under a screaming wheel.” Troop movements from all directions converge as “Trains lead to ships and ships to death or trains, / And trains to death or trucks, and trucks to death.” Poems like “Troop Train” and “Buick” work their magic on the ear—their music mesmerizes. They also record the kind of period detail that appeals to poets who have a special fondness for the images, fashions, and styles of the 1940s. To my mind, however, the most remarkable of Shapiro’s achievements as a young poet are the rhetorical feats you find in his *Essay on Rime*.

There is a breed of poet that blazed brilliantly onto the scene in the 1940s and failed to live up to his promise, going from gladness to despondency and madness in record time. Shapiro, unlike celebrated others, survived to a ripe old age. But interest in his work steadily declined from the golden moment when he won the Pulitzer Prize for *V-Letter and Other Poems* in 1945. It was as if the veteran forfeited the attention that he had received effortlessly as a GI—as if civilian life had rendered him quite ordinary. Part of the problem was Shapiro’s knack for alienating critics and other readers put off by his strong opinions. He was an inveterate controversialist who, in Caroline Kizer’s words, not only welcomed disaster “but lusted after it.” These strong opinions—that, for example, Eliot and Pound were the “Jekyll and Hyde” of modern poetry—are one reason it is fun to go back to *Essay on Rime*.

Assigned to a medical unit in the South Pacific, Shapiro wrote *Essay on Rime* during a three-month period between missions. In his autobiography he noted that the poem was written “on schedule, about thirty lines a day, suave, opinionated, *ex cathedra*.” Writing a 2,072-line poem was this soldier’s way of “goofing off.” Perhaps the very acts of memory engendering it—for he had no access to a library and could consult only a couple of books—constituted a supreme stay against confusion. In any event the publication of the poem in 1945 turned Shapiro into “a kind of phenomenon, a poet in the Battle Zone.”

Essay on Rime has the virtues of an autodidact’s eccentricity. One needn’t concur with Shapiro’s judgments to enjoy his analysis of modern poetry as a trio of crises or “confusions,” as he put it, concerning prosody, language, and belief. Shapiro felt that verse was in a dangerous state of decline and heading inexorably toward a dead end. “Criticism / Has charted poetry into dangerous narrows,” he charged. The breakdown of metrical models was paralleled by a fudging of the crucial distinctions between prose and poetry. The breakdown of belief—“our fall / From faith, from reason, and from natural science”—had resulted in a “bedlam of persuasions [and] personal creeds.” He made the book a technical tour de force—it is all, from the “Foreword” to the “Note and Acknowledgment,” in blank verse—as if its composition were an act of resistance against the tendencies he deplored.

Shapiro excelled at making summary statements. Poe was “the Lenin of the Symbolists.” “Perfection / Is the abuse of form.” Poetry is “Prose raised to the numerical exponent / Of three or six or even *n*.” The popularity of translations had given rise to new debased forms, such as “the pony-text”—that is, the

“translation / Where no original exists,” which Shapiro credits to the success of Stephen Spender’s versions of Rilke’s *Duino Elegies*. Influences were everywhere. Eliot’s influence was rivaled only by Auden’s. A salutary aspect of the latter was his unusual vocabulary. A pernicious effect: his “reintroduction of abstraction / Into our rhetoric” in poems personifying History or Luck, Law or Hell. Hart Crane’s suicide sternly indicted a century’s tragic misunderstanding of art’s nature and purpose. But though Crane died for the wrong ideal, let him not have died in vain:

When we shall damn

The artist who interprets all sensation,
All activity, all experience, all
Belief through art, then this chief suicide
May be redeemed.

I myself regard with pleasure some of the things Shapiro disapproved of. And perhaps it illustrates his argument concerning the “confusion in belief” that I should welcome this new edition of two of Shapiro’s verse essays though I find myself at odds with vital parts of them. Let that be. This book brings back a whiff of its era and will, if read and discussed as I hope, quicken discussion, even debate. Here are ideas, lots of them, written with a fluency that will startle those who think that American poetry is all images, no ideas, or too concerned with the processes of signification to make an intelligible statement. More than a half century since it inspired Czeslaw Milosz to write his own “Treatise on Poetry,” this triumph of rhetoric retains its ability to provoke, instruct, and astound.