On Craft

An Interview with Harvey Shapiro

by Kathryn Levy

Harvey Shapiro is the author of thirteen books of poetry, most recently, *The Sights Along the Harbor: New and Collected Poems.* He wrote poetry while working for decades at *The New York Times*, at various times as editor of the *Book Review* and senior editor of the *Times Magazine*. Educated at Yale and Columbia, he served as an Air Force radio gunner in Italy during World War II. I interviewed him in his light-filled apartment overlooking the streets of Brooklyn and the New York harbor.

KL: As I was rereading *The Sights Along the Harbor* I kept thinking about T.S. Eliot's statement: "Great simplicity is only won by an intense moment or by years of intelligent effort, or both." I was wondering what struggles with language you feel have led to the clarity of your mature work.

HS: I suppose my approach to poetry is more visceral and less intellectual than yours might be or than that of many poets. I feel that the changes in my style or the move toward simplicity have really more to do with the sound I want to make, what I really want in my mouth to taste. Also I'm sure my style has changed as subjects have grabbed me. A lot of the anecdotal and personal work came out of an urgent need to use material of everyday life, something with which I didn't begin. And that, in turn, led to a shift in the way I approached language. I found that some of the rich, dense rhetoric that I loved early on, and that still captivates me in other people's work–and every once a while in my own when I hit it–basically got in the way of my getting at the truth of what I was experiencing.

KL: At Yale you were probably immersed in Milton and other masters of English prosody.

HS: Yes, I certainly was a Milton reader and still am a Milton reader and love those organ tones. And, like Lowell, I loved "Lycidas"–it was my great poem, and I was inspired by it. But we're all part of the culture of our period, whether we like it or not, and certainly the New Criticism, with its emphasis on a metaphysical denseness in poetry, affected the way I was writing when I began.

KL: Was there anyone teaching at Yale who had a particular effect on you?

HS: When I came back from World War II, I wanted to take courses in writing and there weren't any, except for an advanced expository writing class given by Ted Weiss. I took his class and discovered he was a poet and editor of the *Quarterly Review of Literature*. He became a good friend and mentor over the years. He was rare among editors of literary magazines in that if you sent him a poem that interested him but he felt it hadn't achieved what it was supposed to achieve, he would in a very detailed way criticize the poem for you. He would take it apart. The other mentor I had in the English Department was W.K. Wimsatt. I took a course in English Epic Poetry with him in which we read "Paradise Lost" and ended with Eliot's "Waste Land."

KL: Were you already reading Whitman and Crane in those days?

HS: I was reading Whitman when I was in high school and Crane maybe soon after. At Yale, in order to discuss contemporary poetry with my peers and teachers, I became part of an informal group that met, maybe once a week or two, to discuss a particular modern poet. It was the only way we could talk about contemporary poetry at the university because there was no class given that covered any kind of contemporary work.

KL: Many writing students today read mostly contemporary or twentieth century work. I was intrigued by something you once said about George Oppen—that he wanted to capture the resonance of the 16th and 17th century poets he loved in the contemporary poem. What do you think is the value of having that background?

HS: Well, first of all, there's the pleasure of reading great work and there's something about the music. You hear notes that you just don't hear in contemporary poetry and that you want to use. You mentioned George Oppen. There was a poem he had written about seeing his wife Mary in the subway. It's a very beautiful little poem and he said to me, I really wrote that with Wyatt in mind. I've certainly been struck by Wyatt's work and one of the things I've tried to do is capture, as Wyatt did, a woman's voice, so that you can still hear it today. For instance his line, "Dear heart, how like you this?" In some of my poems about women, I've tried to remember their voices and place them in the work. At least it's a chance for them to live on, past the speaker's life.

KL: Those are some of the voices I love in your poetry—of your wife, lovers, even your grandmother. The one poem in your first book, *The Eye*, that breaks out of that formal, elevated mode is "Death of a Grandmother." The first line,

"Let me borrow her corpse a little," sounds to me like the voice of the mature Harvey Shapiro.

HS: That's a very conscious working of Yiddish idiom. Supposedly I spoke Yiddish before I spoke English. I know very little of it now. But for most of my childhood, my grandmother lived with us and she spoke only Yiddish. My parents spoke Yiddish as a kind of dinner-table way of keeping things from the children. That's just the immigrant way.

KL: When did your parents come to America?

HS: My father came over as a late adolescent, and my mother came over as a child, both from Russia. My father would often say we were descended from a line of rabbis, but my mother would always say that means the men didn't work.

But to go back to that line, "Let me borrow her corpse a little," I also heard that use of Yiddish in some of Delmore Schwartz's short stories, which also seemed to me the poetry of someone who wanted to be included in the canon, as well as in Paul Goodman's work and certainly in some of Bellow. There was a surge of Jewish-American writing at the time and I think I was listening to some of those voices. But it's true that the subject of my grandmother in a coffin could have produced a different kind of sound.

KL: I see the tension in your work between colloquial language and the language of the English canon. Presumably you were studying Hebrew as a boy, and the Old Testament and Hebrew literature clearly have a deep resonance in your work.

HS: I have thought about that, too, that I moved from the classicism of Hebrew to the colloquialism of Yiddish, and that struck me, because of the sound changes, a little like moving from Milton to Chaucer. But all these things are so complex because they involve the way you think of yourself as a poet. In using Hebrew you are using what was a priestly language, so if that's in your head at all you're likely to be thinking of yourself dressed in priestly garments with stiff gowns ornamented with silver and so forth. Whereas when I moved over to Yiddish, my image for myself–God knows why I was thinking of it when I started to write this way–was of the Yiddish performers in the Lakewood hotels of my childhood.

KL: Which you mention in a poem.

HS: Yes, which I do indeed mention in a poem. They would come in and roll back the rugs and chairs and put on these Yiddish musical comedies and I just

admired their performances and wanted to be among them. So that's part of the shift to Yiddish from Hebrew.

KL: But your second book, *Mountain, Fire, Thornbush,* still seems to be in the priestly mode.

HS: I don't know if I'd call it that. I was reading a lot of Hasidic stories, mostly in Martin Buber's collection, and what I liked about those stories and the Hasidic point of view had a lot to do with my shift in style and subject matter. As I say in a poem that will be published soon, how else can the mystery approach us except through our daily lives?

KL: I know that you began writing poetry seriously after WWII and I suppose 35 bombing missions would concentrate anyone's mind. Was it the need to write about the war, as well as the other battles of daily life, that led to a stylistic change in your third book, *Battle Report*?

HS: As you say, war clarifies the mind and when I came out of the war I knew I wanted to write poetry. I think "Battle Report" was my first war poem and I probably started writing versions of it soon after the war. When I came back to Yale, I was writing poetry–I contributed some poetry to *Yale Lit* and to *The Yale Poetry Review,* a little magazine that started when I was away and that I joined as an editor when I came back. Those were important experiences for me because I joined a circle of friends–Roger Shattuck and Keith Botsford I guess were the two closest ones–both of whom were important friends for me during my early years.

KL: When did you meet Oppen and Louis Zukofsky?

HS: I met Oppen after I had reviewed his book, *The Materials.* He had published *Discrete Series* and then hadn't written for 23 years while he worked in the Communist Party and was down in Mexico, escaping from the House Un-American Activities Committee. Then he came back to Brooklyn and began to write his poetry. I was working at *The Times Magazine* and was told that somebody called June Oppen Degnan wanted to see me. This was George Oppen's sister, but I'd never heard of Oppen and didn't know who she was. She had some books she wanted me to review, *The Materials* and Charles Reznikoff's *By the Waters of Manhattan,* which she had co-published with New Directions. She didn't tell me that one of these books was by her brother. But shortly after reviewing *The Materials* I got a call from George, and it turned out he lived a few blocks from me. And Louie Zukofsky, as it turned out, lived next door to me in Brooklyn Heights.

KL: You were probably among the last generation of poets who could gather with many poet friends in a city. Most writers today tend to be scattered in various universities. What sort of effect did it have on you, to live near poets with whom you had such an affinity?

HS: Well, George had an enormous effect on me. He became a father figure. I certainly never considered myself an Objectivist or a student of Objectivism. But as a figure of a poet, of how one should take poetry seriously, George replaced any prior figures I might have had. I took it for granted to have poet friends in the city, partly because when I lived in the West Village my friends were Jean Garrigue and May Swenson, among many others. I assumed that's the way you lived, with a circle of people who had things in common with you. And you lived a kind of neighborhood life. The idea of the Village in those days was never to have to go above 14th St.

KL: Could you talk a little bit about Reznikoff?

HS: Well, he was certainly the sweetest of the poets whom I met, the least ambitious or envious or political. He had written in total obscurity most of his life and had learned to run a printing press in order to get some books published. But toward the end of his life, after New Directions published *By the Waters of Manhattan,* he began to be read and he was just thrilled to be asked to read at St. Marks or to be brought to universities or anthologized. There was no bitterness in him, even though New Directions dropped him and he went back to publishing his own work.

KL: I didn't know that.

HS. They didn't do his Holocaust book. They did his *Testimony* and then they dropped that. But Rezi was the least interested in theory of the poets in that group and certainly held Zukofsky's obscurity against him.

KL: The obscurity of his writing?

HS: Yes. His ideal of writing was classical Chinese poetry. That's certainly what he had in mind, what he thought he was writing. As for the Objectivists, he said to me that the only thing they had in common was that nobody would publish them and that they all subscribed to the "Do's and Don't's" that Ezra Pound was then publishing in *Poetry* magazine.

KL: I've been reading Reznikoff's Holocaust book recently. What do you see as the challenge of writing about the Holocaust?

HS: I think one has to be careful in writing about it. It's like touching the Torah in the Old Testament. If you touched the ark and you weren't supposed to, you'd drop dead. I think one has to be careful in dealing with a subject that immense and when you're writing about it, you have to remember what Adorno said–that there can be no poetry after the Holocaust. In a sense I believe it, but I write poetry in spite of it. It's hard to compete with Paul Celan and I don't know why one would want to. So I've written very few poems about the Holocaust. For one of them, about the Angel of Death whistling Mozart, Louie Zukofsky once said to me, "We both used the same image."

KL: That was Mengele in Auschwitz.

HS: Yes. It must have been in the newspapers and we both read it at the same time. Bicycling through the camp, whistling Mozart. I guess both that poem and "Ditty" come out of some animosity toward the Christian world and toward Western civilization for permitting this. But American Jews were very meek, it seems to me looking back at that period, in accepting the fact that America was not going to do more to stop the mass slaughter. And I suppose I had some guilt, too. Undoubtedly, I was on bombing missions, flying over those camps and the trains. I felt I could have done something more than I did.

KL: Not without orders.

HS: Not without orders. Absolutely true.

KL: That brings me to something you've discussed before, a kind of argument with America and the Christian culture. In relation to "The National Cold Storage Company" in particular you've mentioned your continuing argument with Whitman and Crane. What's the nature of that argument?

HS: "The National Cold Storage Company" was written at a very specific time, about a few days or a week after the assassination of John Fitzgerald Kennedy. I had spent the week editing articles about that for the *Magazine,* so it was in my head. And I remember I wrote the poem walking on the Brooklyn promenade, looking at the National Cold Storage Company, which no longer exists.

KL: A particularly resonant phrase in that poem is "…or the Bridge/is not a harp at all."

HS: Yes, that's obviously an argument with Hart Crane. I read a lot of Crane and at that point in American history I was filled with foreboding. He felt that the

bridge was the promise of industrial America and we'd get to utopia this way. I didn't feel that way. I felt a period of sort of blundering darkness coming. We don't work through our traumas, and they all get dumped and put into cold storage and come back and take forms that one could not have foreseen. And, yes, I suppose the argument is partly with Whitman. It's an argument with his comrade-liness and his Rousseau-like belief in the goodness of everything, which I don't have.

KL: I don't think I've ever asked you about this—was it a decision or by chance that you became an editor rather than continue teaching?

HS: I stopped teaching because I didn't enjoy the academic life. I don't know what would have happened had I come up later when MFA programs proliferated. But in those days there were none, except in Iowa, and I was not a scholar and had no wish to get a Ph.D. The first job that I applied for after the war was as a radio operator on a tramp steamer. But I couldn't get into the Maritime Union. However a lot of us who were writing then believed that a writer should have some kind of job during the day that would take him into the world and have him meet different people and that his writing should be done at night. Well, in fact that's what I did. I worked as an editor, but journalism is not poetry and I did lead, in a way, two very different lives. Although there are connections, and certainly being a line editor is a help in whatever you're writing,

But I'm a little concerned in our talk that it would appear I've made conscious decisions about what to write or how to live my life and it's fairly clear to me, looking back from the eminence of my 87 years, that some of the most important moves I've made, which changed the pattern of my life, have come about without my knowledge. It's very close to Homer, the psychology that you get in Homer of a god or goddess inhabiting the hero. And if you're the hero of your own life, as we all are sometimes, you suddenly are moved in a direction you didn't think you were going to move in and it's almost as if you were possessed and there isn't anything you can do about it. That's been true for me, I think, most of my life.

KL: But it seems to me that you've been particularly attracted to dissonance, or, as you sometimes say, to chaos.

HS: That's true, that's true. Yes, I feel most at home in the moment before creation, you know, before God brought order to the world.

KL: Momentary order. But to get back to your life while you were at *The Times*, you've described coming home, having dinner with the family, pouring

some bourbon at eleven and starting to write. After you stopped working full time, did the process of writing change?

HS: Well, yes, I no longer do that. I've always gone through periods of dryness, though I've fought them more diligently before than I do now. Auden said he felt sick any day he didn't write and I understand that. I feel that one has to justify one's life in some way, and if you're a writer, the only way to justify it is to write. But I think that I wrote against the urgency of the day's turmoil. It's a little like Stevens's "The House Was Quiet and the World Was Calm." That's a great feeling after a day's work. Just as taking a breath after a mission and knowing that you don't have to fly probably for another week or so made the air suddenly more valuable, more enjoyable than it had been. You don't have the energy at 87, but I feel blessed that I can still write at all, and I'm happy that I've been able to do some new poems that I really like.

KL: What do you think was most beneficial for you in your apprentice years as a poet?

HS: Writing all the time. Reading other poets. It seems to me that among the poets today there is a kind of rush to achieve a style and a polish early on, and then to continue to write in that way. And as a young poet you don't understand that though this can facilitate the writing of poetry, it can also stand in the way of your writing the poems you should be writing, so that it becomes a kind of body armor that immediately makes your work an artifact and places it in the world of art. Where you want it to be, I suppose, but that also prevents things from happening that would happen if you were less armored and less protected. It's important to be vulnerable, to be open, to be somewhat unsure of what you're doing. And it's also important to stay in touch with your own material and your own self and not be carried away by what is fashionable at the moment.

KL: Eliot writes in "East Coker" that "Old men ought to be explorers." Are there things that are interesting for you to explore at the moment? About our country? Your life as a Jew?

HS: Yes, all those things. Everything is interesting to me right now. I don't know if old men should be explorers because arthritis gets in the way, but there's a certain urgency to figure out what's going on that young people may not feel in trying to make sense of the life you've led so far. We're all of us creating stories about ourselves as we move along, and toward the end you want to go back and see if you can read the story correctly or is the story really quite different from the one you thought you were composing? There's a little Wyatt poem, a translation

from Seneca, about the man who dies without knowing himself and there's the description of the terror of that kind of death. So you want to have some knowledge of yourself before you die. You don't have to share it with anybody.

As for the mystery of being, I'm sure Eliot wouldn't agree, but I think one should be less interested in "is it a wheel, isn't it a wheel?" I think as you get older that becomes less important and what becomes more important is the ability to feel the mystery itself, to enjoy what the everyday brings.

Italy, 1944

by Harvey Shapiro

That day when we came back from a mission,
in a field beside the tents where we slept
lay a woman and a baby under a blanket.
Beside the blanket was a pile of lira notes.
A line like a chow line snaked through the field.
She was taking them on, one by one,
a squadron of flight crews and ground crews
who could easily get in town whatever they wanted
for a loaf of bread or a pack of cigarettes
but preferred to stand in a muddy field, watching and waiting,
while the blanket humped and the woman earned
whatever it was she had to earn in one day from that war.

Muse Poem

While I'm waiting for the words,
Could you just
Lean over me a little,
That way,
With your breasts
Of imagination, incense,
And blue dawns.

It is always the same quiet night,
You in your desperation say,
"What you are writing is poetry.
No one will read it."
You worry about my health
When I find I am not
To be famous. But I am
Already inside you in my thoughts.

The Absolute Truth

by Kathryn Levy

I was raised in a school–in
the basement of a school. My mother
was a witch who fed me
chalk for breakfast. She made me learn
to love it. Or I knew nothing else
so I came to hate eating. I have a home
on Venus. I am fond of the heat. All
my lovers are tall–six foot three–they
bend down when they kiss me. Or
they lift me up–I'm as light as
a no one. We have no seasons, but I
always need change, so I dream new
lovers, I travel to the earth–I am
heading to see the final glaciers
before they melt. And the sea turtles on the last
island they can breed. I've lived
two hundred years, but I've
found the new ointments–my
skin is glowing, my body still
supple. Last night one of the lovers
crawled into my bed: *I need*
to dig deeper. He thinks I don't
love him. And he's right. I dwell in an egg
in my home on Venus. And all
that world outside? It is chalk.