

Ian Patterson
The Plenty of Nothing

Sam Buchan-Watts
interviews James Womack

Paul Bachelor
Rilke's *Orchards*



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Master of Two Worlds

ANDREW LATIMER

YOU CAN IMAGINE the anticipation: Hyam Plutzik, a thirty-year-old American-Belarusian farm-hand, secretary, journalist and, most successfully, poet, licks the back of an envelope containing a seventy-two-page letter, which had taken him seven months to construct, in which he expounds upon the previous seven years of his life's experiences since leaving Yale in 'disgrace' – complete with poetic extracts, mystical fibrillations and a varied, if not a little deflating, curriculum vitae. And who was the addressee of this epistolary magnum opus? None other than his old Trinity professor, Odell Shepard.

More than just any old university professor, Shepard was the type of professor that has in a way come to define the golden age of American academia of the 1940s and '50s – learned, without being overly scholarly, politically motivated (I mean a genuinely politically active citizen, not in the way that many university professors think of themselves as 'political' now) and first and foremost a teacher of first-class calibre. In fact, Plutzik described Shepard as 'one of the great teachers of our time [...] an upholder of dignity against system and mechanism'. Shepard won the Pulitzer Prize for Biography in 1938 for his *Pedlar's Progress: The Life of Bronson Alcott*.

And what was Shepard's reply to his long-estranged student's unexpected intrusion? A guarded two-page answer – never actually posted – full of the paternal restraint appropriate to a teacher not wishing to encourage his pupil further. Shepard's response is almost beautiful in its curtness and is the absolute antithesis of Plutzik's letter: the haiku to Plutzik's jeremiad. All of which begs the question, what on earth possessed Hyam Plutzik, on turning thirty – seven years out of college and during a time of international chaos – to write this seventy-two-page letter to an old teacher who remembered him dispassionately, if at all?

Guilt, would be my first suggestion. Woody Allen, reflecting on his own experience of 'Jewish guilt', once joked: 'When we played softball, I'd steal second base, feel guilty and go back.' Plutzik, the son of Jewish immigrants from Belarus (who spoke only Yiddish, Hebrew and Russian until the age of seven), is clearly haunted by this kind of guilt, which I am told is different to Catholic guilt because, whereas the Catholic resigns himself to a form of eternal naughtiness, the Jew always feels that he should be doing better – or in the words of the Angeleno Rabbi Mordecai Finley, 'I just always feel like I'm fucking up absolutely everything.' Not unrelated to this notion of Jewish guilt, in Plutzik's letter there is a more pertinent streak of a guilt almost as terrifying and persuasive: academic guilt.

Intellectually curious and poetically accomplished (he won the Yale Poetry Award twice), Plutzik's approach to learning was more heuristic than ordinary academic practice allowed. He secured a scholarship from Trinity College only to leave 'as meek as whipped dog', before finishing his studies – the president of Trinity referred to him as 'a disgrace'. Cast out onto the streets of New York as an idealistic but, ultimately, shy young man – 'If there is one outstanding element in my character it is that I am slow in making friends' – Plutzik winds up working for, amongst others, the Brooklyn Eagle – Walt Whitman's old haunt. But, as he finds out, much has changed since Whitman was there one hundred years before – the shock of the city overwhelms his delicate sensibility:

I love my fellow men to be sure – as individuals. But humanity en masse is a monstrous thing, particularly if it is pressed together so tightly that the individuals in it lose their human dignity. And to a poet such humanity is absolutely devastating.

One is reminded of a young Thom Eliot encountering 'the dead' of early twentieth-century London.

Throughout his metropolitan interregnum – for Plutzik is a pastoralist at heart – one is aware of his constant struggle with what was, and to some extent still is, an inevitability for the young and intellectually stimulated youth: the academic career. He is disgusted by it – 'I hated graduate work and thought it a waste of time'. But his disgust is all the more insidious because he knows that he is well suited to the career. Whenever he is engaged in the unacademic – loafing through New York, pretending to be a secretary, getting 'scoops' for low-brow publications – Plutzik's sense of guilt, sometimes an altogether more Calvinist-damnation version of it, is palpable:

as I wandered in the city, seeing the sordidness, the evil and the pain, there came to me the feeling that somehow we were astray [...] that] this was some lost path, a shadowy street that moved farther and farther away from the light and from which one could not turn back. Was it our bestial ancestors?

'In New York,' hypothesises Plutzik, 'it is utterly impossible to talk oneself – with dignity.' And it is whilst in pursuit of such dignity that he eventually finds himself with 'a chance to get out into the sun and to exude some wholesome sweat', on a family-run farm in Cornwall, Connecticut.

Manual labour, perhaps unexpectedly, revives Plutzik's respect for, firstly, his fellow man and, con-

sequently, books – 'I was discovering that books were not spectres at all, but friends; that, indeed, I was a bookman at heart.' At Purple Rim Farm, Plutzik kills a woodchuck that had been pestering the crops. The unexpected violence of this act grips him, leading to a metaphysical tremble, the kind that readers of Plutzik's poetry will be so familiar with, and which forms the stock for his first long poetic meditation 'Death at The Purple Rim' (1941):

And I heard in the tall grass an agonized threshing,
The groan of an articulate throat, the rattle
Of death that had come through my hand. And my
breath shortened.

The editors of *Letter from a Young Poet* were wise to make the connection in their title between Plutzik's letter and the correspondence that took place much earlier between the young Franz Xaver Kappus and Rainer Maria Rilke, later entitled *Letters to a Young Poet* (1929). There is much common ground: Plutzik, like Kappus, is concerned about his direction in life, and the conversation in both takes place between an older, literary man and his 'apprentice'. But whereas in the Rilke-Kappus correspondence it is the elder, more experienced writer's letters that fascinate us, here it is the younger poet's thoughts and life experiences voiced almost in soliloquy that have us turning page after page as though it were a detective thriller.

And, in a sense, it is – a piece of detective writing. Everything is probed for evidence, every facet and each fat roll of life is checked. The unravelling of adolescent sensibilities, the sense of pride one gets from cashing a pay cheque, a literary analysis of Hamlet is inextricably bound up in Plutzik's metaphysical examination of life – his paranoid awareness – in a way that approaches the plot of a Borges, or even a Pynchon, fiction (although the effect of his writing is very different from either). Plutzik leaps beautifully from the mundane to the mystical:

The things most people take for granted I do not take for granted. The realm of sense, on whose existence my neighbors seem to rely implicitly, I know is a film as thin as a dragon-fly's wing.

Plutzik's grasp of the physical is part of, not distinct from, his purchase on the metaphysical:

I try to express in words the world of the mystic: a curved world like the [subway] tunnel itself, where everything is driven back like the material forces of light and sound, and the mind too is frustrated as it searches for an egress.

At the end of the 'tunnel', the movement of the mind towards light and truth, there is the suggestion that, ultimately, experience must lie beyond the compass of the linguistic, or as Rilke once advised the young Kappus: 'most experiences are unsayable, they happen in a space that no word has ever entered'. Plutzik, like Rilke, was a mystic.

Thom Gunn knighted Plutzik 'the master of two worlds, the natural and the supernatural'; Ted Hughes referred to his *Collected Poems* (ed. Anthony Hecht) as a 'sacred book'; both included him in their anthology *Five American Poets* (Faber, 1963). Neither Gunn nor Hughes, however, had read Plutzik's long letter to Odell Shepard. Yet their combined assessment of Plutzik – as a mystic go-between, between this world and another – is confirmed and strengthened by the (re-)appearance of this important and fascinating letter. Its publication will do much to convince another generation of readers of Hyam Plutzik's rare and extraordinary gift.

Plutzik finally posted his letter on 11 December 1941 – the US had entered the war just three days earlier. He joined up in 1942 and was stationed in Norfolk (UK). Here, Plutzik gathered up the experiences that would later form the content for his war poems: 'Bomber Base', 'The Airfield at Shipdham' and 'The Airman Who Flew Over Shakespeare's England'. In spite of the context of his time in England, I like to think that he enjoyed what the country had to offer him: Shakespeare's land. Plutzik was a great Shakespearean. One only has to read his long poem *Horatio* (1961), a sequel to Hamlet, to see that Plutzik, perhaps more than any other twentieth-century poet, convincingly integrated Shakespearean free verse with the modern poetic idiom. Perhaps, even, than Gunn.

At the air base in Shipdham, Norfolk, while 'beasts with guts of metal groan[ed] on the line', Plutzik sighted a lark – a rare glimpse of High Romanticism in a time of war. 'It is too late', wrote Plutzik 'to praise its song'. Thanks to the Watkinson Library at Trinity College and the great work being done by his literary estate, it is not too late to praise Hyam Plutzik, nor should it ever be.

Hyam Plutzik's *Letter from a Young Poet* is published by Watkinson, Trinity College/Books & Books Press (2016), \$15.95