

## Hyam Plutzik, American Poet: The Making of a Remarkable Course

Sidney Shapiro

For ten weeks, from the first week of April through the first week of June 2012, I had the privilege of leading a course at the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute (OLLI) at Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT)<sup>i</sup> that featured the poetry of Hyam Plutzik. This was my contribution to the Plutzik 50/100 Centennial celebration.<sup>ii</sup> Here is the story of that course. How class members, a number of them poets with several volumes of poetry to their credit, reacted to being made aware of the person and poetry of Hyam Plutzik. How one of the class members shared with us the Hyam Plutzik he knew as his professor and the influence that experience had in his becoming himself. How, astonishingly, our attention to just one of his poems led to its identification as a novel form invented by Hyam. How the study of his war poetry shed light on the contrast between his experiences of World War II and those of Anthony Hecht, who also became the Deane Professor of Poetry and Rhetoric at the University of Rochester (UR). And how this writer, a former physicist, ended up leading poetry courses at OLLI and the cascade of events over more than twenty years that culminated in this unique course.

The course met once each week for one and one-half hours. At the first session, the hour-long film *Hyam Plutzik: American Poet* was shown.<sup>iii</sup> There is no better way to make people aware of Hyam Plutzik the man and the poet. The film examines his connections to his family and to his Jewish origins, as well as experiences that had a major impact on the person and the poet he would become.

It does this through the comments of those who knew him well, both family and faculty colleagues, juxtaposed with readings of some of his poems by poets such as Hayden Carruth, Stanley Kunitz and Donald Hall. In subsequent class sessions, a number of these poems would be read and discussed with the insight provided by the film always in mind. But first there was time left in the first class meeting to read two poems and to discuss their significance for this course.

One poem was "[The Geese](#)" from the 1959 volume *Apples from Shinar*.<sup>iv</sup> This is the poem that will represent Hyam Plutzik on the Poets' Walk now under construction in the Art Walk area along University Avenue near the Memorial Art Gallery in Rochester, New York. Strollers will be able to use cell phones to access a recording of the poem read by James Longenbach of the English Department at the UR. Longenbach is one of the long line of poets in that Department that began with the hiring of Hyam Plutzik just at the end of World War II. In his Afterword to the new re-issue of *Apples from Shinar*, David Scott Kastan writes, "Time is Plutzik's subject, 'the monomaniac passion, time' ('The Geese'), and in his carefully measured poetry, precise but never precious, he wins his victory over it."

“The Geese” is in three stanzas of three lines each, followed by a concluding single line. The class discussion homed in at first on Plutzik's use of “screaming” in the first line:

A miscellaneous screaming that comes from nowhere

Some commented that geese do not *scream* and that this word threw them off. But others pointed out that a poet's choice of words was itself significant and that one should seek what the use of “screaming” sets the reader up for. Soon it was agreed that the poem was about *time*, as Kastan wrote, but also about *death* and that “screaming and its departure from the real sounds of Geese primes the reader to recognize this when taking the poem as a whole. This insight illuminated the magnificent final stand-alone line:

Value the intermediate splendor of birds.

Here we are reminded that the *time* during which we can “value” birds in all their “splendor” is limited by their ultimate *death*.

The second poem discussed on that first day was [“Cancer and Nova.”](#) I had nominated “Cancer and Nova” in December, 1998 for Robert Pinsky's project *Americans' Favorite Poems*.<sup>v</sup> It was one of only two hundred poems accepted out of the many thousands nominated and it appeared in the project's first volume published in 2000. But my connection to Hyam Plutzik's poetry and to this poem in particular began ten years earlier in December 1990. Some years before, I had begun volunteering as a reader for Reachout Radio, Rochester's reading service for the blind and visually impaired. My main assignment was a once-a-week reading live on the air of a section of one of the local daily newspapers. But in addition I took on other assignments from time to time including reading from magazines, reading books over the air, and for nearly three years presenting one of the weekly sessions of “Poetry Spectrum.”

The poems read on “Poetry Spectrum” were selected by the reader, who had to convey each poem through the voice. I would tape a program each week that was aired later. It was in the fifth program I did for “Poetry Spectrum” that I read poems by Hyam Plutzik. That program was taped on December 12, 1990 and broadcast on December 20. One of the four poems I read then was “Cancer and Nova.” It is one of the poems that show Hyam's “fascination with mathematics and the sciences (at college he had originally intended to major in chemistry),” as Anthony Hecht wrote in his Foreword to *Hyam Plutzik: The Collected Poems* (1987).

Once *Americans' Favorite Poems* was published, I copied the page on which “Cancer and

Nova” appeared and included it in a letter to Tanya Plutzik (Hyam's widow). From that time on, Tanya has befriended my wife Jan and me and has taken us into her continuing efforts to make people aware of Hyam's poetry. It was at her invitation that we attended on May 14, 2007 the premiere at the George Eastman House (Rochester, NY) of the film *Hyam Plutzik: American Poet*. And it was at her request and with her encouragement that I offered the course at Osher.

One of the class members, Al Kremer, now retired from a successful career as an attorney in Rochester, mentioned that he had taken a course in modern poetry from Hyam Plutzik in 1960. Afterward he sent me an email about his experience and agreed to take ten minutes or so at our next class to talk about what it all meant to him in his growing up. He delivered such a moving personal memoir of the enormous positive impact that Hyam had on his life that we all burst into applause when he concluded. He has contributed a piece on the subject to [“A Fistful of Words.”](#)<sup>vi</sup>

One class was devoted to just three of Hyam's poems that have been included in anthologies. We began with [“Jim Desterland.”](#) the poem that has appeared in seven anthologies including the 2010 volume *What Poetry Brings to Business*.<sup>vii</sup> The discussion went on for half the class time and yet did no more than touch on the themes of life and death the poem explores. Class members appreciated that the solitude of the poem's setting makes possible the special moment of insight when

The doors swung open, the little doors,  
The door, the hatch within the brain

Much was made of the poet's use of sound rather than vision through careful choice of language such as “whisper,” “bellowing,” “the cry of a gull,” “a roaring in the skies.” Some class members were puzzled by the steps the poet uses

to mark the place

and some were unsure of the meaning and significance in the same stanza of

I crouch upon the thwarts and wait.

But other class members elucidated the indicated triangulation and the use of “thwarts” to give the reader the feeling of being in the boat.

Next we turned to the short poem with a long title, [“And in the 51<sup>st</sup> Year of That Century, While My Brother Cried in the Trench, While My Enemy Glared from the Cave.”](#) The discussion swirled around the likely identity of the “Brother,” of the “Enemy,” and of the speaker. Though the use of “51st

Year of That Century” suggests perhaps the Korean War, as the fields “like a coin of silver” might suggest reflections from rice paddies, it was the “And” at the beginning of the title that finally convinced us that, like a fable, the poem applies at earlier times as well as a possible specific present time. So it is a poem on a human condition that results from our seemingly never-ending wars. The discussion might well have consumed the balance of the class had I not cut it short because I was determined to read to discuss [“The King of Ai.”](#)

In “The King of Ai,” the speaker chastises God for having commanded that terrible things be done to the people of Ai. The sack of the city and the stratagem used to carry it out, as well as the hanging of the King of Ai, are detailed in Chapter 8 of the Book of Joshua. In a way it is revenge for the failure to capture the city as described in Chapter 7. In an earlier class in which we read and discussed several of the poems presented in the Plutzik film, the idea that the poet would talk with God, reason with Him, even argue with Him (see for example [“God and My Father”](#)) seemed hard for some of the class members to take in. Presumably this is not nearly as prominent a theme in Christian scripture as it is in Hebrew scripture.

To my surprise, there was much discussion of the first line of the poem and especially of its final word: “They hanged the King of Ai at eventide.” It was claimed that “eventide” was a religious term that referred to the Christian practice of evening prayer. Stating that evening prayer is common in Jewish practice and indeed is common in many religions did not resolve the matter. Nor did my turning to the dictionary and pointing out that “eventide” was defined as meaning “evening” and was often preferred in poetry.

But we did move on and the power of the words used in the poem in evoking the horror of the events and in setting the stage for the dramatic line “O God be merciful at eventide” was universally felt even by those unfamiliar with the relevant passages from Joshua.

Having spent the bulk of our time on the substance of the poem, I found it necessary to comment on its unusual form, since no one seemed to see it until I pointed it out. The poem is formed in ten couplets with the end words of the first couplet, “eventide” and “city,” repeated in reverse order in the second couplet. The alternation of these two end words continues throughout the remaining couplets.

Now David Hill, a retired Professor of English whose specialty was the intricacy of language, decided to follow up on the form of this poem. He contacted a friend, Lewis Turco, who is noted for his poetry but especially for *The Book of Forms: A Handbook of Poetics*,<sup>viii</sup> which has seen several updates and revisions since its original publication in 1968. Turco was fascinated by the poem and asserted it was a novel form invented by Hyam Plutzik. He intends to include it in the next edition of his *Book of*

*Forms.*

But the story gets even more astonishing. Just a few days later, David Hill told me that Turco had used this new-to-him form in a poem about his father, a poem he had been contemplating for a long time until the stimulus of “The King of Ai” and its novel form provided the push he needed to write it.

One class was devoted entirely to [“Horatio.”](#) Knowing it would be impossible to discuss, let alone read, the entire poem in just one and one-half hours, I decided to limit our scope to just two parts, the [“Prologue”](#) and [“Carlus,”](#) the fourth and final part of the first “act” of the poem, titled “What A Wounded Name.” The class was urged to read the entire poem ahead of time and several did.

To give just a taste of the dramatic aspect of the poem, the parts to be discussed were first read as though it were a play. Ed Scutt, a poet, playwright and actor, took the role of Horatio and David Hill became Carlus. Class members had the poem in hand and could listen while looking at the printed text or could just listen to Ed and David perform.

I chose “Carlus” because 2012 is an election year for us and the interplay between Horatio, who has dutifully served several Danish kings, and Carlus, the Prime Minister of Denmark, brings out the contrast between the one who seeks to tell Hamlet's story as it truly was and the politician for whom truth is whatever he constructs:

The nub of my little story is that it fits.  
It's neat, takes some unpleasant circumstances  
And explains them in a way that's best for Denmark,  
And so...  
Is true, if truth there is.

The relevance of Plutzik's poem to today's world was pointed out over and over again. In sum, “Horatio” is a gem and the class members delighted in becoming aware of it.

But as the class neared its end, there was yet one more twist. A member insisted that we had to read and discuss the final dozen or so lines of “Horatio.” The images of the signing bird and the great stag that came out of the wood were deeply felt. A sterling end to a magnificent poem and a stimulating discussion.

The last few classes were devoted to the war poems of Hyam Plutzik and of Anthony Hecht. Here were contrasted the differing experiences of war that each poet endured and the different poetic expression of these experiences. Whereas Plutzik enlisted in the Army in 1943 when he was thirty two, ultimately becoming an officer in the Air Force, Hecht was drafted before completing his undergraduate degree. He was placed in the ASTP—Army Specialized Training Program. Those selected for ASTP were assigned to one of the more than two hundred participating universities where

they took courses designed to train them to serve in Army Intelligence or other specialized units. They received college credit for these courses and Hecht completed his degree with these transferred credits. But suddenly the Program was terminated and all of the two hundred thousand or so participants were assigned to infantry combat units.

A class member, Bob Nolan, spoke up when I referred to Hecht's experience in ASTP and told us all that he too had been drafted out of college and assigned to the ASTP unit at Princeton. The credits from Princeton were enough to complete his UR degree. But he too found himself in the infantry and in combat when ASTP was terminated. Just as Hyam Plutzik and Anthony Hecht found in poetry the way to capture the effect of World War II on them, so did Bob Nolan who later shared with us some of his war poems. Hecht's "[A Friend Killed in the War.](#)" which describes the death of a comrade in combat,

And his flesh opened like a peony,  
Red at the heart, white petals furling out.

is echoed in Nolan's "The Orchard":

The back of the man ahead blossoms  
With a quivering mass of tendrils  
Ruby red against the olive drab<sup>ix</sup>

Here was yet another extraordinary coincidence in this course, and one that had each of us in our own particular way feeling the emotion of the combat experience from which we were personally spared.

Hyam Plutzik too was spared direct combat. Yet he knew that the work at the air base he served on in England was meant to deliver death. And his war poems bring the contrast home as in these lines from "[Bomber Base](#)":

The machines are quiet before the day's struggle.

And

Now the thatched farmhouse sleeps in the dark  
Among wakeful men, moving swift to their task.

Plutzik's separation from the immediate horror of war gave him the vantage point to raise the moral question. Among the few spare lines of "[Hiroshima.](#)" he poses the question in such a way that none of us can avoid it:

And we behind the man who gave us the signal—  
How do we sleep?

It was my intent in having war poems read and discussed that the class too come to grips with one more horror that also raises moral issues. We know that Plutzik intended to write a long poem on the Holocaust. In part, he would need to deal with those Jews eliminated by the Nazis in the town his family had emigrated from. All of us who lost family in “the old country” during the Holocaust have sought to learn their fate. But we do have the stunning poems of Anthony Hecht such as [“More Light! More Light!”](#) and especially [“The Book of Yolek.”](#) For Hecht was in the unit that liberated the Flossenburg concentration camp. For years he suffered mental problems from the horrors he witnessed there. My idea was that these Holocaust poems would help the class connect to the importance of his Jewish descent for Plutzik and his poetry. The class discussions and personal comments I received later suggest that this connection was indeed made.

The course was a remarkable experience for me and for the class members. For me there was the wonder, the excitement and the joy in being the transmitter of Hyam Plutzik's poetry to such a receptive group. The impact on the class members was well put by one of the well-published poets in the class when she said how marvelous it was to become aware of and to study the work of such a truly remarkable poet. I hope the reader of these words comes to feel just how remarkable this course was, a fitting contribution to the Plutzik 50/100.

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- i What is now OLLI at RIT began twenty five years ago as The Athenaeum at RIT. Members, who must be at least fifty years of age, lead the courses offered. Receipt of an endowment from the Bernard Osher Foundation led to the name change in 2006.
- ii The website [www.hyamplutzikpoetry.com/centennial](http://www.hyamplutzikpoetry.com/centennial) provides complete information on the Plutzik 50/100. All of Hyam Plutzik's published poems can be read at [www.hyamplutzikpoetry.com/poetry](http://www.hyamplutzikpoetry.com/poetry).
- iii *Hyam Plutzik: American Poet*. Dir. Christine Choy and Ku-Ling Siegel. Film News Now, 2007. (Documentary film)
- iv Hyam Plutzik. *Apples from Shinar: poems*. Special Edition with Afterword by David Scott Kastan. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2011.
- v Robert Pinsky and Maggie Dietz, editors. *Americans' Favorite Poems: The Favorite Poem Project Anthology*. New York: W.W.Norton & Company, 2000.  
Maggie Dietz requested Tanya Plutzik's address from me and soon sent her a copy of the anthology.
- vi Al Kremer's contribution to "A Fistful of Words" can be read at <http://www.hyamplutzikpoetry.com/2012/03/31/a-marvelous-lesson/>.
- vii Clare Morgan, with Kirsten Lange and Ted Buswick. *What Poetry Brings to Business*. Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press, 2010.  
"Jim Desterland" is given in its entirety at the end of Chapter 2 which carries the subtitle "Thinking Beyond the Facts: Where Poetry Takes You." There is an epigraph to Chapter 2 which comes from the last stanza of "Jim Desterland":

...there is the sound  
Of all the atoms whirling round  
That one can hear if one is wise

- viii Lewis Putnam Turco. *The Book of Forms: A Handbook of Poetics, Including Odd and Invented Forms*. Revised and Expanded Edition. Lebanon, NH: University of Press of New England (UPNE), 2011.
- ix Here is the complete text of "The Orchard" by Bob Nolan. Reproduced with the author's permission.

*The Orchard*

Hurry up and wait since before dawn  
Cold steady rain leaves a quagmire  
Our feet bring up gobs at every step

At our starting point in the orchard  
Unpicked apples dropped from the trees  
Make the footing slippery and tricky

Suddenly whines, swishes and cracks  
Signal the arrival of eighty-eight fire  
Followed by artillery and mortars

The back of the man ahead blossoms  
With a quivering mass of tendrils  
Ruby-red against olive drab

We pull the shattered but living  
Out of the line of fire and get at it  
But rifles have little effect on tiger tanks