

## Hyam Plutzik's *Horatio* as Post-Holocaust Poem

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One of the most promising American poets of the post-WW2 generation, Hyam Plutzik (1911-1962) received widespread acclaim when his 2,000-line poem *Horatio* (1961, Atheneum: New York) became a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize. Sadly, he died a few months later at the age of 50. He first began work on this poem in 1945, while still serving in the US Army Air Force in England. Regarded by prominent critics as a brilliant, modern philosophical sequel to Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Plutzik's poem is a first-person account written in "a long, loose blank-verse line" of Horatio's lifelong attempts to tell the real story about his late friend, and thus honor his memory<sup>1</sup>. But *Horatio* can also be read through a post-Holocaust lens: the tale of a survivor pursuing truth, preserving tradition and dignity, retelling with his every breath the story of his dead friend (paralleling the Holocaust's "never forget" imperative), combating stereotypes and the sway of myth on the public perception, countering deniers in every generation, and questioning the value of all things—including the role of poetry itself—and of man's place in the universe. These themes were cornerstones of Plutzik's poetic sensibility (as suggested in his shorter poems as well, and in his letters and other writings).

Since Hyam Plutzik was a contemplative poet, it seems reasonable to assume that the Holocaust would have profoundly affected his life and his work. Given Plutzik's personal history, his poetic sensibility and the era in which he wrote, it also seems reasonable to think that he had the Holocaust in mind while crafting *Horatio*. He admitted in later years that he had emerged from the war a changed writer. More specifically, during the same years he was drafting

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<sup>1</sup> Gibson, Walker. "Poetry to Tell a Story." Review of *Horatio*. *The Nation*, May 6, 1961

and revising *Horatio*, he outlined another long poem that he intended to write, on the Holocaust itself. *Horatio* can thus be seen as a worthy companion to this venture.

### **Plans for a book-length Holocaust poem**

In 1954, applying for a Ford Foundation fellowship, Plutzik mentioned plans for a long poem on “man’s inhumanity to man”: “the terrible atrocities which the 20<sup>th</sup> century has produced, with particular reference to the Nazis.” He envisioned it as “a philosophical poem with narrative parts” and said that he has been collecting insights for the past four years—all during the time when he had been drafting *Horatio*.

Plutzik called his planned work “the most immense subject for a poem in our times: the massacre of six million Jews by Hitler.” He wrote that it was hard enough to write a requiem for one man, so how can one do justice to writing about 6 million? As he put it, “Grief ends beyond one or two or three; beyond that there are only statistics.”

Plutzik describes his vision for the project in these terms:

An introduction, in which “the six million ghosts appear at midday on Main Street.”

A section in which the victims speak, telling of their crime ... “all too often that of merely being alive” and punishment “usually the fire, or sometimes the self-dug grave.” The format he imagined was: “I was so and so...I did such and such; for this I went into the fire.”

A section listing the crimes of the twentieth century, which he pictured “as something like the catalogue of ships in Homer, except that here we do not have heroes but victims.” The section would include narrative and expository material, names of the victims of “the various terrorisms and tyrannies of our time: Communist, Fascist, and other; victims of the tyrants who had no ideologies...of injustice in states not ordinarily tyrannical...of the bestialities of war...of the isolated malicious impulse that...reflects the maniacal strain of our time.”

A section dealing with Anne Frank, who he expected to become an important figure in the poem, inspired by her diary. Envisioning “her eyes and voice” speaking against her killer “in the halls of eternity” so that he isn’t safe.

Finally, a section on his parents’ little town in Russia, Lapichi (meaning “old shoe” or “peasant’s clog”) in the province of Minsk, near Bobroisk, famous as a strongpoint in WW2 and near the river Beresina where Napoleon’s armies foundered in their flight. He heard many stories

about the town from his mother and father; before his death, Plutzik's father sent him at his request a long description of the town as well as translations of letters from their few surviving relatives, recounting the fate of the family and their own harrowing experiences. Thus Plutzik, not unlike Horatio, is now in possession of the story, which must be recounted to others. He writes of one story his father heard: "When the Nazis arrived, those Jewish inhabitants who had not managed to flee were herded to a spot on the outskirts, forced to dig a big pit, shot, and buried there. And all that remains of the community is a big mound of earth."

The Holocaust poem he proposed was not to be primarily about Jews however but about "people who suffer." He did not picture the poem as "a cry for vengeance" against those who committed the monstrous crime, but as "an exploration of the areas of evil in the human heart." Thus, "The massacre of the six million Jews must be remembered, not that a particular nation may be saddled with the crime but so that men, all men, may always be aware of, and on guard against, their extraordinary capabilities for evil. For the vastness of the crime makes it almost incredible, and that which is incredible is forgotten or ignored, once the generation of those who grieved personally is past. The job is to make the event credible, to show that it really happened. And for this, one needs not history, but a poem. Many poems."

Plutzik first conceived the idea for *Horatio* in England at the end of WW2. Shakespeare's *Hamlet* was intended only as a starting point for his creativity; this long narrative was not to be a mere sequel: it was meant instead to be a blend of ancient themes with modern variations. Plutzik was curious how Horatio would fare in taking up his friend's request to tell his story—how any man would tackle such a task at such a dark time in history. It took some 15 years for Plutzik to complete this long narrative poem (three sections, 12 parts), which employed the same unrhymed iambic pentameter favored by Shakespeare. The time of the poem's action spans 50 years since Prince Hamlet died.

### **An analysis of *Horatio* and the poet's intentions**

Absent thee from felicity awhile,  
And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain,  
To tell my story (*Hamlet* V,2).

Reading this final wish of Hamlet's, it is easy to be reminded of those who perished in the Holocaust imploring those who survived to tell their stories... never to forget. But as any poet knows, the truth of one's life, clouded by pain and death and shaped by time, is not so clear. It takes years for the full story to come out, if in fact it does at all. Even now, more than 60 years after the Holocaust, new things are being revealed: a new take or agenda, a long-held secret, a lost account. It is the same with Hamlet. Horatio embarks on a lifelong pilgrimage on behalf of his friend, much as the Jews of Europe after WW2 went in search of their homeland, in search of peace and dignity, in search of an audience of future generations that would keep their stories alive. Horatio also had to counter the myths propagated about Hamlet, the PR/disinformation campaign at work in every generation to criticize and/or discredit. Horatio's task (as is that of any witness of past horrors) is first to educate: to tell his dead friend's story: to undo the false impressions, misperceptions, and stereotypes that have arisen. He must research: listen to others' interpretations, various versions, over time. He must dispel the lies, offer proof, counter the revisionists, and thus promote the truth as he has witnessed it. The poem is a series of dialogues over many years in which Horatio encounters a range of characters who are not sympathetic to his task, not supportive of his view of history. He is contemplative and combative, when needed, much like Plutzik. In fact, Hyam Plutzik may have been his generation's Horatio.

The poet Anthony Hecht sees Horatio as "the naïve pilgrim who meets some very odd specimens of humanity" over the course of his experiences, which turns out to be his own education.<sup>2</sup> Horatio's first challenge, in the first section, comes from Richard the ostler a year after Hamlet's death. It is the ostler who sensationalizes the story, distorts the rumors, tabloid-like, about the prince. He dismisses Horatio as a liar when he comes to his friend's defense, insisting his version—that of Hamlet as a murdering madman—is right. According to Plutzik, "Here Horatio comes up against the vast human capacity for being wrong yet of involving the wrongness with so many strands of rightness that it is impossible to separate them."<sup>3</sup> People, though ignorant, prefer what they have heard and what they know, and are not easy to sway.

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<sup>2</sup> Hecht, Anthony. Foreword to *Hyam Plutzik: The Collected Poems*. Brockport, NY: BOA Editions LTD, 1987.

<sup>3</sup> Plutzik, Hyam. Letter to Miss Lawrence, Harper & Bros. June 1, 1953.

Twelve years after Hamlet's death, Horatio visits Dr. Faustus, a philosopher who wants some news about the other's travels: his thoughts have been prowling "through this old den, Europe...with its wars and alliances...the mad events which history...heaped before our eyes." But Faustus is more concerned with symbolism than in man; he abstracts deeply human events into existential conflicts of Being/Becoming:

For when a man who moved in history  
Enters the universal, passing once  
The abstract symbol before the haughty door  
Of high philosophy, there's no return  
Into the stupid hovel of bone and flesh.

Dismissing Horatio's defense of Hamlet and his "incredible catalogue of ghosts," he is emotionally removed from things—living in the mindset of so many who could not fathom the reality that so many had been killed by Hitler even in the light of the overwhelming evidence of the extermination camps' existence. As further proof of his emotional distance, Faustus refers to Yorick's skull as a symbol for earth rather than the demise of a man—just as the mass graves and the crematoria remains produced by the Nazi death machine were seen more as symbols rather than once-living men and women.

Thirty years removed from his friend's death, Horatio appears in the court of the French count and countess, who offer the high society view—the latest buzz over the affair. They are indifferent, witty, condescending, mocking Horatio's loyalty after all these years. They prefer to talk of love and romance, pleasantries and jest, rather than murder. Hamlet is a melodrama to them: a tale that could be turned into a smart Parisian play. While Horatio defends his dead friend, the court is too caught up in its pleasures. They see Hamlet's tragedies as "crude" compared to their own. Certainly the French have been critical and indifferent to *Hamlet* and Shakespeare. Looking at this episode more cynically, we recall how the French suffered under the puppet Vichy government, yet it was minor compared to the suffering of other countries that didn't capitulate to the Nazis. Horatio refers to "Europe, that crouches out there barbarously" at France's borders. Plutzik seems to have had Germany in mind.

When Horatio encounters Carlus, the prime minister of Denmark, 43 years after Hamlet's death, we come face to face with a cynical, realpolitik, Hitlerian style of governance in which nothing is real or true or can be made so by brute assertion; i.e., we create our own reality, as

Anthony Hecht suggests in his foreword. We see the differences between the man who makes history on the practical level and the man who moves on the intellectual level. Carlus cautions Horatio about continuing to spread this story of royal infidelity and regicide lest others emulate these acts; sees Horatio's preoccupation as subversive and dangerous. He admonishes him for his disloyalty to the state (though Horatio serves ten kings in his lifetime): making a fool of himself for his "infatuation," his "wild obsession" with the memory of "mad old Prince Hamlet." Carlus tells Horatio that they laugh at him at court throughout Europe. But despite this, Horatio would build "a monument of truth." Such grief, says Carlus, is against God, who already "marks all men for death, both friend and foe"—it's overdoing grieving. He asks, "What is this truth you would exhume from the grave?" Killing kings is wicked—and that is what Hamlet did, he claims. Furthermore, he questions Horatio's credibility: the testimony of a ghost. What's best for Denmark is what matters, and the stability of Christendom. Individuals don't count. Horatio stands accused just as Jews have been accused of overdoing the Holocaust, even exaggerating it, milking it for their benefit so many years after the fact, keeping the memory alive though almost all the perpetrators have died, continuing the blame (e.g., looking for reparations from Germans who weren't even alive during the war).

In Section 2, Horatio, now 74, encounters the "confused tales" of the shepherds who live in a desolate corner of Denmark, whose oral version offers the most formidable challenge to Horatio's task since their account is based on the primal, universal earth myth, pre-Christian fables about Amleth, from which Shakespeare fashioned his Hamlet. Listening to the shepherds is like listening to "a strange sect / Describing his homeland...near the mouth of hell" and of God turning his back on man: who "neither condemns nor pities... / His eyes reflect the crimes of the world, but his hands / Are listless, heavy with doom..." "God let it happen" is their attitude: a common reaction of survivors of the Holocaust as well. It doesn't matter that the Amleth story has been created by "an obvious, ignorant tongue" as well as a "brutish mind that thinks of history / As a boy thinks of his toy house, whose blocks / He rearranges to make a prettier pattern / In the hour before bedtime." Germany built its monuments too, a regime the Nazis thought would stand a thousand years. According to Plutzik, Horatio rejects their story as

“barbarous and irrational, yet finds himself emotionally accepting it” though he wrestles with the relationship of this myth to the truth.<sup>4</sup>

In the final (third) section, two years after hearing the shepherds’ tale, a remorseful Horatio says that he has not done the task Hamlet asked of him 56 years earlier when his friend condemned him “to the hateful prison he fled.” He now knows that truth does not have “a single face” as he once believed. Time has worn away Horatio’s vision of truth. He has stood by while others made a mockery of the truth. His burden has become something terrible; he feels that he has become “Spokesman and servant of my enemies” doing their dirty work, has become like them even. As a result, blaming himself, Hamlet has received mercy but not “Justice from men.”

Only in the last pages does Horatio offer his opinion, having come to terms with things. This is the final vision as Plutzik sees it: “the possibility of the triumph of the good...which is about as far as we can go in our time” (1949 commentary). In a letter to Kay Kohler, his University of Rochester colleague and chair of the English department, Plutzik says that Hamlet “disappears into the old myths of the earth, the universality of the story inevitably connecting it with the myths of light and darkness, good and evil.”<sup>5</sup>

If the distorted and biased views of those whom Horatio met on his travels of half a century give him pause, then what is the truth? And what impact does time have on events? Horatio’s meditations on his failure lead to doubts of Hamlet and his own loyalty. At the start of the poem, Horatio tries in vain to correct the different interpretations of his friend’s activities. In the second section, when the story reverts to primitive legend and the natural and supernatural worlds overlap, the roles of hero and villain have been transposed—only Horatio knows what happened, and even he is not sure over time. By the third section, when Horatio is old and near death himself, he meditates on the proper interpretation of Hamlet’s death, reaching understanding only in the final images where he finds peace at last.

### **Critical reaction to Horatio**

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<sup>4</sup> Plutzik, Hyam. Commentary by the author. Plutzik Archives. 1949?

<sup>5</sup> Plutzik, Hyam. Letter to Kay Kohler, University of Rochester, Department of English. Nov. 1952.

In *Cold War Poetry: The Social Text in the Fifties Poem*, Edward Brunner looks at *Horatio* within the context of the times: the end of WW2 and the start of the Cold War, when it took individual courage to find the truth and still survive. It was a time when the world failed to produce “leaders of courage and strength”; instead, “timidity and evasion” reigned.<sup>6</sup> Hyam Plutzik confronted these larger issues—not turning inward as did most poets of the time.<sup>7</sup> One way to understand the different takes of Hamlet’s story is to posit that the educated and uneducated circulate different stories of the same event. Brunner says that Plutzik “portrays the disenfranchised [the poor, simple shepherds] not as victims but as inventive survivalists who ingeniously cobble together versions that work for them...reveal the limits of their understanding and the brutality of their lives”—much like the simple Germans Hitler won over in his rise to power. This was a period of history “intricate with a duplicity” that ensnared even the best of individuals, *Horatio* included.<sup>8</sup>

Perhaps it is Plutzik’s language and imagery that create the more convincing case for making an analogy between *Horatio* and the Holocaust. One reviewer said that “His imagery is both astonishing and appropriate, with the strange aptness of the images in some vivid nightmare. Some of it recurs, like a Wagnerian motif.”<sup>9</sup> Another said that he “has a passionate obsession with the wastage and violation of war.”<sup>10</sup> With his darkness and sombre themes, “Plutzik conveys a claustrophobic atmosphere of terror.” Responding to the horrors of those times, he “takes his place among American writers of doom, catastrophe and helpless disaster emanating from the Manichean nature of God.” His poems offer “a wry, sometimes slightly malign, pleasure in men as puppets, and confront clearly their personally held truth with an honesty which, now and then, fuses into a dark fiery vision of neutral universal life in time, of human beings and nature in one brutal order.”<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, he refuses the lies of “a uniform

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<sup>6</sup> Brunner, Edward. *Cold War Poetry: The Social Text in the Fifties Poem*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2001, 159.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 254.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 152-159.

<sup>9</sup> “New Books in Review.” *Yale Review*, June 1961, 591.

<sup>10</sup> Alvarez, A. “Whatever Happened to Modern Verse?” Review of *Five American Poets*, Thom Gunn and Ted Hughes, eds., London: Faber & Faber, *The Observer* [London], June 9, 1962.

<sup>11</sup> Stallworthy, Jon. Review of *Five American Poets*. *The Critical Quarterly*, Autumn 1963, p. 285-6.



world.”<sup>12</sup> In his world view, men would not march in lock step, goose-stepping, in stiff-armed salute. Even humor at key times “punctuates the narrative, and a belly-laugh breaks in on the gasp of horror.”<sup>13</sup>

The critic and poet Mark Van Doren, in a letter to Hyam Plutzik, opines that Plutzik justifies the idea of *Horatio* “by a reckless sort of realism” that “modernizes the subject matter without repudiating its ancient source.” Further, he sees “ghastly ironies” in section 2.<sup>14</sup> In an earlier letter to Van Doren, Plutzik had spoken of his poetry as the product of “passion recollected in disquiet”—not in tranquility. He recounts Van Doren’s remark about his tendency “to meditate on things and emotions, rather than to re-create them at first hand.” Plutzik admits to being “incorrigibly introspective” in his verse, “beset with the past.” Here is his view of the matter: “What *is* happening cannot be understood; it can only be felt. What *has* happened is eternal; its face is secret, but the veil is not far beyond the outstretched hand.” Finally, he admits that “a certain *shadowiness*” surrounds his verse ...abstractions and disembodied spirits take the stage.”<sup>15</sup>

By the end of his journey, *Horatio* knows that “facts about Hamlet assume their own force and logic, and that time is the greatest liar.” Further, Plutzik “perceives and accepts all the vicious, the thoughtless, the expedient and the ignorant changes man makes and calls history. This perception of enduring human behavior makes *Horatio*’s story itself a universal tragedy, and it rises at the end toward heaven’s gate and a meeting at last with the ghost of Prince Hamlet, when all wrongs may be righted.”<sup>16</sup>

### **Hyam Plutzik’s commentary on *Horatio***

Hyam Plutzik asserts that *Hamlet* torments the western intellectual and that its central character is a kind of an archetype to express 20<sup>th</sup> century man who grapples with the relativism

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<sup>12</sup> “New World Poetry.” Review of *Five American Poets*. *The Times* Literary Supplement [London], Nov. 1, 1963.

<sup>13</sup> Frank, Joseph. Review of *Horatio*. *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 13:3, Summer 1962.

<sup>14</sup> Van Doren, Mark. Letter to Hyam Plutzik. Feb. 26, 1953.

<sup>15</sup> Plutzik, Hyam. Letter to Mark Van Doren. Nov. 20, 1946.

<sup>16</sup> Frank, Joseph. Review of *Horatio*. *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 13:3, Summer 1962.

of historical truth. Horatio, however, “rejects such relativism as immoral.” In his notes for *Horatio*, Plutzik comments on Hamlet’s metamorphosis in these words: “He comes to his own, so far as we are concerned, only when he takes on cosmic significance, when he becomes diffused among the processes of nature, and a part of them, a primordial god or mythic figure. He becomes multiple and multifarious, expressing himself at the lowest level as an elemental scheming or willingness, and instinctive urge for revenge at the highest level as an urge for righteousness for salvation.” Focusing on Hamlet’s charge to Horatio “to live to explain him to the unsatisfied,” Plutzik envisions his poem not as a sequel to Shakespeare but “using Hamlet as a body of reference for poetry...as if it were historical fact.” Horatio’s goal (and Plutzik’s) was to “try to establish the basic facts, the untrustworthiness of witnesses, the shifting facets of truth, the effect of the attrition of time and memory—it should be recalled that many aging survivors of the Shoah wanted to tell their stories before it was too late.

Hyam Plutzik noted that “historical fact degenerates, or should we say, evolves into myth, or is absorbed into myth,” but in metaphorical language. Even Shakespeare’s Hamlet is not a historical Hamlet, but myth. With Horatio, there is a reversal of things: the myth becomes reality. This is a myth that takes Hamlet “through a number of strange transformations and masks and disguises and personifications as Hyam Plutzik attempts to express the work in what he described in his notes as “aspects of twentieth century man.”

Horatio thus assumes the viewpoint of his creator as he sees “a vision of modern man: divided, betrayed, full of guilt, anxiety; cut off from his roots and from God; tormented by time and the self; steeped in a century of violence and tyranny; confronted by selfhood and a universe of increasing ambiguity.”

### **Hyam Plutzik’s poetic vision, central themes in his work**

Plutzik’s ongoing themes and shorter poems set a tone that can offer an interpretive backdrop to Horatio’s tale. Throughout his poetry, Plutzik used history, literature, mythology, anthropology and even references to the Talmud and traditional Jewish prayer. He first saw poetry as “little more than beautiful language” largely detached from the intellectual life of its time” but then he saw it as “communicating the nuances of the world” and finally as “the synthesizer and the humanizer of knowledge” whereby poets turn knowledge that might not be

fully assimilated into human terms...and that poetry, science, and philosophy (an understanding of psychology is also essential) cover the same ground: “complementary facets of the same world. To blur one of them is to spoil the jewel.” He added that “There is a unity behind the apparent multiplicity of things.”

In an intellectual autobiography he wrote in the 1950s, Plutzik classified knowledge of the world into matters of science, philosophy and poetry, plus religion. Of the four, he believed that poetry “is locked out of the house of the intellect, or relegated to a corner of the rose-garden, which people are usually too busy to visit...” Only students of literature would think of going to a poet to find out something of our world, he said. But love of poetry, he says, doesn’t automatically make people good. “Many of the Nazi students who cheered Hitler to power were ardent lovers of Goethe, and no doubt spent passionate hours in the beer halls discussing the soliloquies of Hamlet.” Plutzik agrees with Shelley when he says that “poetry is not necessarily in itself moral but serves a moral end by heightening the imagination and sympathies.” The value of poetry is that it is a “continuing, living thing” though most see it as “hardly of immediate importance” and even “antiquarian.” Only by making it a “living force” do we “put it in its due place.” As for the poet’s own journey: “The voyage into the primitive” is a modern equivalent to “the excursions of the old Romantics into distance and the past.” The only way to reconnect it to the modern sensibility is “to attain a deeper awareness of those matters and subjects which are kindred to it and...contribute to our total view of the world.”<sup>17</sup>

Another key theme in Plutzik’s work was to discover “What is hidden, waiting for me—” (“George Hobbs”). Yet there is a “tension of Being in all things” (“Entropy”). What is man’s place in the universe where “the bullies of the sky” retain their mastery (“Patterns of Earth”) and life can be compared to God’s “desperate game” (“The Mythos of Samuel Huntsman”)? And then there is the quiet witness of the world (“I am disquieted when I see many hills”), a timeless view of man lost in time and oblivion, where darkness “bathes the universe.” In “Sprig of Lilac,” while time silences all, there is “no door between” the living and the dead: the present and the past give to each other, back and forth. In fact, death is even a bitter memory: a kind of vengeance (as is seen in a memorial poem “My Sister,” written seventeen years after her death).

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<sup>17</sup> Plutzik, Hyam. “Intellectual Autobiography and Proposed Project.” Ford Foundation Fellowship application. 1954. The quoted material in the paragraph that follows is also from this source.

And even when “The Dispenser of Vengeance laughs,” Plutzik is haunted by the death of one so close—as Horatio was by Hamlet’s. Writing in “The King of Ai,” the poet pleads: “O God be merciful at eventide: / Remember him you condemned by the flaming city.”

### **Hyam Plutzik’s Jewishness**

After the Holocaust, Hyam Plutzik’s was the voice of diaspora assimilationist Jewry: those Jews who accepted American culture while honoring the Jewish heritage and culture of their past though without the religious overtones. This universalist approach to the world allowed Plutzik to become outspoken about the Cold War, McCarthyism, quotas, breaking barriers, assimilation, the American dream, civil rights, and adopt a larger humanistic framework to counter the rigidities of politics. The consciousness of the Holocaust had changed America and he was among the first to notice. Yet, he was seen as a “casual” Jew who held a liberal view of America and the place of Jews within society, as in his poem “Portrait,” where he writes of the assimilated Jew who casually forgets, then ignores history (“Notice with what careful nonchalance / He tries to be a Jew casually.”). One critic doubtlessly had this notion in mind when he described Plutzik himself as “the carefully assimilated Jew.”<sup>18</sup>

This “casualness” is arguably what allowed Plutzik to break through the quota system of his time, becoming the first Jewish faculty member at the University of Rochester in 1945. Not meaning to assume this role, he became the quintessential upwardly-striving Jew, making good in a culture and climate of limited acceptance. Nonetheless, he fit in, believing in a “brotherhood” of all people perhaps because he was raised in the hinterland of rural Connecticut, among gentiles. Even though he spoke only Yiddish when he first attended school, he outdid his peers, succeeding at their game. He attended Trinity College then went on to Yale, becoming the only person to have won two Yale poetry awards.

As the first Jew to be hired to teach at the University of Rochester, Plutzik broke through the restrictive climate against Jews that took the form of quotas during this period. Though other letters of recommendation in his teacher-placement file mention his Jewishness, Odell Shepherd, his beloved undergraduate mentor added the following comments to his otherwise laudatory

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<sup>18</sup> Joseloff, Samuel Hart, ed. *A Time to Seek: An Anthology of Contemporary Jewish American Poet*. Bridgeport, CT: Hartmore House, 1975.

evaluation: “Due allowance, whatever that may be, should be made for the fact that Mr. Plutzik is a Jew. I have never seen in him any of the unpleasant traits that are commonly attributed to men of his race. He is unworldly, retiring, extremely sensitive, gentle in manners, unselfish, modest, loyal. He has the appearance and manner of a gentleman...His speech...shows no unpleasant peculiarities....”<sup>19</sup>

In stark contrast to this genteel world of the university stands Plutzik’s family background, his distinctly Jewish, Yiddish roots. In 1905, Plutzik’s father and mother emigrated to America from a village in western Russia. Plutzik was born in Brooklyn in 1911, and lived in rural Southbury, Connecticut between the ages of 2 and 12. His father became head of the Jewish community and school in Bristol, CT. Hyam Plutzik attended a one-room country school—not the setting one would expect for a Jew of those times.

Sholem Aleichem’s little town in Russia evoked memories for Plutzik of his own family, though he grew up in an assimilated environment, in part nurtured by his early love for literature. His mother told stories about her town, similar to Aleichem’s, with its poor people “and a narrowness and a smell and a suffocation...But he loved it.” Yiddish is referred to by Plutzik as “one of God’s cities of refuge.” He also says that it is significant that Aleichem, the greatest Yiddish writer, is a humorist. We would expect the language of this group, constantly persecuted, to have “overtones of bitterness” but it doesn’t, though sometimes it can be described as “woefulness.” Plutzik’s Horatio always spreads humor amidst the tragedy.

Plutzik’s Jewish forebears instruct him even if he did not live their traditional life as an assimilated Jew. (Ironically he is buried in Old Montefiore cemetery in Queens, NY, near the grave of the recently deceased Lubavitcher Rebbe.) Plutzik’s grandfather is the stern Jewish ghost in one of his poems (“On the photograph of a man I never saw”); family lost to him is deeply troubling, evoked by the lines “I am troubled by the blank fields, the speechless graves...Here lies someone.” These are, over time, nameless graves where his family has been buried for a thousand years. They are lost to him—except when he travels between the world of the living and the world of the dead in another poem (“After Looking into a Book Belonging to

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<sup>19</sup> Letter by Odell Shepard, January 22, 1934. Office of Teacher Placement File, for Hyam Plutzik, Yale University, New Haven, CT. Odell Shepard was someone Plutzik greatly respected. In 1941, Plutzik wrote a 74-page letter to Shepard describing his intellectual journey since leaving Trinity. Shepard was a Pulitzer Prize winner in biography for *Pedlar’s Progress*, a 1937 bio. of Bronson Alcott, Louisa May Alcott’s father.)

My Great-Grandfather, Eli Eliakim Plutzik”) And in many of his poems the living and dead, the present and the past, pass back and forth between these two worlds and give to each other. There is “no door between” them. Dead relatives, ghosts appear in many of his poems, just as the spectre of Hamlet hangs over *Horatio*, just as the six million continue to haunt men and women of conscience.

Thus Plutzik questions, even denies, God, as did many survivors of the Holocaust, building a life despite the “tortuous paths” set before them:

God is brutish life!  
God is the living ether!  
Within these strange entrails  
We must build our beautiful houses.  
(“The Mythos of the Man from Enoch”)

Also, in “The Milkman”:

You are the thief of the secret flame,  
The forbidden bread, the terrible Name.  
Return what is left; go back where you came.

Many Holocaust survivors blamed God for what happened, and thus abandoned their faith.

But Plutzik sought ways to incorporate the language of the poet into the language of Jewish traditional prayers. In a 1960 “Memorandum to the Prayer-Book Committee,” Plutzik offers suggested translations for some of the traditional Jewish prayers in the Reform prayerbook in the era immediately following the Shoah. Plutzik argues for the rejection of “traditional, and often archaic, locutions that have attached themselves to the liturgy, to the degree that they almost become a trade-mark of this form of expression” while advocating “translating the prayer-book into a fitting modern idiom.” He believed “A prayer is of eternity but language is of a particular time and place.” There is a danger in talking in “obsolete terms” when “things should be immediate in their impact.” Yet, he adds, there is “something ceremonious about the older forms...a certain dignity about them, a certain remoteness. They give formality and weight even to the ordinary statement.” And long association with prayer makes them familiar to people. Translation, however, “should express itself in the best available diction of its time...a continuous living tradition.” “It would be absurd to set Shakespeare into modern English, or the

Hebrew prayerbook into modern Hebrew.” There are “more valid ways of giving dignity to a prayer...style should be more integral.”

### **WW2 affected his life and poetry**

Plutzik tackled anti-Semitism after the war by lecturing on the subject (via the work of Pound, Eliot, and Cummings), though he believed that poetry could transcend these issues. In a poem (“For T.S.E. Only”), in which Eliot is called to task for his views on the Jews, he refers to him as brother; both are poets despite their great differences. In his desire to embrace all humanity, Plutzik thus has an understanding of and tolerance for other poets. We are in exile together, he believed. Plutzik enlisted in the US Army in 1942 and in May 1944 went overseas, where he served as ordnance officer in the 500<sup>th</sup> Squadron of the 44<sup>th</sup> Heavy Bomb Group, a B-24 outfit stationed at Shipdham near Norwich in Norfolk, England. He later became Education & Information Officer of his base, teaching courses and accepting “the constant incredible job of explaining to the fighters why they were fighting.”<sup>20</sup>

“Elegy” was the only poem he finished there, where it was hard to write or “think for oneself”—the poem came to him while walking under the wings of a B-24 bomber and watching men head for a mission. Here is an excerpt from the poem:

He walked quietly among the loud ones,  
In the first world and the eternities following,  
Till the pale flame of the spirit sank  
And flickered out in the last wilderness.  
There on a plain vast and shadowy  
Come at last those who have run their course,  
Where the minions of God regard them coolly and see  
As in a fog the starved fires sinking.  
It is pitiful how long the test goes on.

The letters Plutzik wrote during the war offer clues as to the impact of what he witnessed on his life and poetry. Perhaps it is here where he began to see himself as Horatio: telling the

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<sup>20</sup> Plutzik, Autobiographical narrative, 1949.

truth as he observed it firsthand when more spectacular stories were fighting for the world's attention.

When the invasion of France began, he recounted how he passed that day; writing about watching the planes take off from England: "roaring in the long takeoff and then ris[ing] up laboriously in the air. For hours later a roar could be heard above the clouds." Men worked loading the planes with "500-lb'ers" (bombs); "They worked as though fiends were pursuing them...this was a load of death for the enemy." The men are almost nonchalant in their work except for their haste, yet even still "they have a detestation for the bombs." In the background, he sees "a farmer harrowing an adjacent field behind a plodding horse."<sup>21</sup>

After the war (he was discharged in late 1945), this experience seemed to haunt him: the death of those he served with, the role of the soldier in the death of others. In "The Old War," he bemoans the loss of those he served with, who went down in "...the iron sparrow/That fell from the sky...a mad beast's bellow":

"Ten good men, pilot and gunner—  
Trapped in the whirlpool, held by no hands,  
Twisting from truth with curse and prayer."

In "Bomber Base," he matter of factly describes the job of loading bombs:

"Hoist up the bombs carefully into the belly  
Of this great monster and do not look too closely  
At the work of your hands as you thread the fuse, performing  
The set procedure, till the thing is ripe for killing."

He abhors the death, the killing, though it is necessary and soldiers must distance themselves emotionally from their task.

In "On the Airfield at Shipdham" written in 1959, Plutzik declares it's too late to praise the song of "the lark" in seeing the plane overhead: "The small lonely singer beating its wings / Against the pull of the old and evil earth."

The moral concerns raised by the war are seen in the short poem "Hiroshima," in which he asks whether those involved in dropping the bomb will later sleep well. How do we deal with

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<sup>21</sup> Plutzik's journal, June 5, 1944.



culpability? Plutzik also knows that people and nations can be led to war against their will. In another short poem “The Dissociation of Asa Lumbrett,” he wonders who is the general, the “master of tame herds” if there is no terror, no war. Is man so easily bullied, led? Plutzik thought long and hard about the war and its consequences as well as his hand in it.

The war did have an effect on him, in his thinking and in how he viewed his writing: “Some odd change or development seems to have taken place imperceptibly during this period, for I seem to express myself in utterly new ways...less personal and introspective...more prone to write about other people...much less romantic in my language.”<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Plutzik, Letter dated 1949(?)

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