



## IN MEMORIAM

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Karl Shapiro  
Professor of English, Emeritus  
Davis  
1913 — 2000

Karl Shapiro, professor emeritus in the UC Davis English Department, died at a hospice in New York City on June 14, 2000. He is survived by his son, Jacob, and his daughter, Kathy, both children from his first marriage to his editor and agent, Evelyn Katz. He was also married to Teri Kovach Shapiro – a much loved friend to many members of our department – who died in 1982, and he now leaves behind his third wife, Sophie Wilkens, along with his son and daughter, three grandchildren, and one great-grandchild.

A cherished teacher and colleague of ours from 1968, when he first came to Davis, until 1985, when he retired from academia, Karl was also one of the leading poets of his generation. As a young combat soldier during the second World War, he won the Pulitzer Prize for one of his earliest volumes of verse – *V- Letter and Other Poems* (1944) – and then went on to gain countless other honors, including the Shelley Memorial Prize (1945), two Guggenheim Fellowships (1945-46; 1962-63), and the Bollingen Prize (1968), along with election to such prestigious organizations as the National Institute of Arts & Letters, the National Academy of Arts & Sciences, and the Library of Congress's Fellows in American Letters. Among his many books of verse some of the most renowned are *An Essay on Rime* (1945), *Poems of a Jew* (1958), *The Bourgeois Poet* (1964), *White- Haired Lover* (1968), *Adult Bookstore* (1976), *Collected Poems 1948-78* (1978), and *New and Selected Poems, 1940-1986* (1986), while some of his most notable prose works include the critical collections *In Defense of Ignorance* (1960), *To Abolish Children and Other Essays* (1968) and *The Poetry Wreck* (1975), as well as a novel, *Edsel* (1971), and two autobiographical works, *Poet: Volume One: The Younger Son* (1988), and *Reports of My Death* (1990).

Karl Jay Shapiro was born on Nov. 10, 1913 in Baltimore, a city he was later to describe in one poem as a place of “row- houses and row- lives. . . . face after face the same, the same./ the brutal visibility of the same.” Yet his was never a “row- life” nor did he himself ever surrender to the tyranny of sameness. Although he studied at the University of Virginia and the Johns Hopkins University, Karl never earned a college degree – yet he was a man of extraordinary learning, as any of his colleagues could attest. Of his early *Essay on Rime*, for instance, a work drafted while he was still posted in New Guinea, the critic F. O. Matthiessen remarked in a contemporary review that the “book may well be the most remarkable contribution to American art yet to have come out of the war” while more recently the *New York Times* described the volume as “noteworthy for its intellectual acuity” and for a scholarliness that was “evident even though it had been created without consulting any books.” Despite his lack of the usual academic credentials, moreover, Karl not only served as editor of two prestigious journals – *Poetry: A Magazine Of Verse* and *Prairie Schooner* – but also taught with distinction at a range of campuses, among them – in addition to U.C. Davis – the Johns Hopkins University, the University of Nebraska, and the University of Illinois, Chicago Circle.

To be sure, about academic employment, as about what he was sardonically to define in the title of one work as the “Poetry Wreck” and in the title of another as the “Sad (But Hardly Sudden) Decline of English Poetry,” Karl was often insouciantly ironic. Of his own career as editor and teacher, for instance, he wrote that he had discarded jobs “like a poodle shaking off bath water,” and his defiant assertion that “the rational person is least able to understand poetry” clearly undercut the assumptions of the New Critical classroom. Perhaps most notoriously, though, in a widely-read essay that he published in *The New York Times Book Review* in 1959, Karl averred that poetry was “a diseased art,” blaming the dire influence of such writers as Marianne Moore, William Butler Yeats, Wallace Stevens, and – especially – T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, the latter of whom he comically compared to Robert Louis Stevenson’s infamous Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. (Eliot, he declared, was Jekyll if only “because of his identification with the British church and state.”)

Perhaps, as Joseph Parisi, the current editor of *Poetry*, has speculated, it was this “opposition to the high Modernism of T. S. Eliot and the New Criticism that had dominated literature and the Academy since the Thirties” that caused Karl, “despite receiving numerous honors and holding prestigious literary positions” to “remain an outsider” in the literary establishment. But even if Parisi’s analysis is right, his definition of this major poet as an “outsider” points to what was for Karl a self-chosen role, a role founded on a deeply-ingrained irreverence that characterized our colleague’s lifelong stance toward what is sometimes called “pobiz.” The writer of Karl’s *New York Times* obituary notes, for instance, that “a famous episode in American letters” developed around Karl’s “lonely” opposition to the 1948 decision of the Fellows in American Letters of the Library of Congress to bestow the Bollingen Prize in Poetry on Ezra Pound, then still sequestered in St. Elizabeth’s Hospital because of his wartime pro-Fascist activities. Voting for Pound were such luminaries as W. H. Auden, Conrad Aiken, T. S. Eliot, Robert Lowell, Katharine Anne Porter, Allen Tate, and Robert Penn Warren. Only Karl and one other fellow voted for a different author (William Carlos Williams). “I was suddenly forced into a conscious decision to stand up and be counted as a Jew,” Karl later remembered, and his subsequent volume *Poems of a Jew*, significantly, defined “the free modern Jew” as “neither hero nor victim” but rather as “man left over, after everything that can happen has happened.”

In a curious sense, Karl himself became a kind of poet “left over” for a while. In the late seventies there were odd rumors of his death, which those who knew him well will remember having left him comically bemused (and which later provided him with the title for his memoir *Reports of My Death*). And during the eighties, at least one critic described him as “more a name than a presence,” while even his sometime admirer Carolyn Kizer defined him as an artist who perversely “lusted after” disaster. For those of us who were lucky enough to be his friends and colleagues, however, his abiding irreverence was always a source of delight. Poet-Laureate Stanley Kunitz – who has recently joined David Ignatow in coediting an anthology of Shapiro poems tellingly entitled *The Wild Card: Selected Poems, Early and Late* – speaks for many of us when he asserts that although (or perhaps more accurately because) Karl “offended many in the literary culture with a certain brashness of tone in voice, a refusal to be conciliatory,” he became one of the most undeservedly neglected of poets. Karl, declares Kunitz, “was a guy who took great chances. He was a gambler. He played the wild card for high stakes and this is not what the academician/ critics wanted.”

As Karl’s longtime associates, most of us believe that, despite an unwarranted eclipse in late life, he won his gamble for literary success. And just as importantly, despite (or again because of) his irreverence toward academic stuffiness, he was a splendid teacher for numerous classes of Davis students – as well as for those colleagues fortunate enough to lunch and dine with him as he ruminated on the “Poetry Wreck” or reminisced about his editorial days at *Poetry*. As we who loved him knew, after all – and as some of his more vituperative critics ought to have understood – Karl’s often comic belligerence toward the vagaries of the late twentieth-century Ivory Tower was rooted not in anti-intellectualism but in his own extraordinarily high intellectual standards, a commitment to aesthetic excellence that had shaped *An Essay on Rime* when he was an army medic in New Guinea and that would inform the many accomplished essays and poems he produced throughout his dazzlingly prolific career.

Perhaps the charm, as well as the astuteness, of Karl’s irreverence toward academia is best expressed in “The Humanities Building,” a poem inspired by Sproul Hall, where the English department at U.C. Davis was housed throughout his years on our campus.

All the bad Bauhaus comes to a head  
In this gray slab, this domino, this plinth  
Standing among the olives or the old oak trees,  
As the case may be, and whatever the clime.  
No bells, no murals, no gargoyles,

But rearing like a fort with slits of eyes  
Suspicious in the aggregate, its tons  
Of concrete, glaciers of no known color,  
Gaze down upon us. Saint Thomas More,  
behold the Humanities Building!

On the top floor  
Are one and a half professors of Greek,  
Kicked upstairs but with the better view,  
And two philosophers, and assorted Slavics;  
Then stacks of languages coming down,  
Mainly the mother tongue and its dissident children  
(History has a building all its own)  
To the bottom level with its secretaries,  
Advisors, blue- green photographic light  
Of many precious copying machines  
Which only the girls are allowed to operate.  
And all is bathed in the cool fluorescence  
From top to bottom, justly distributed  
Lights, Innovation, Progress, Equity;  
Though in my cell I hope and pray  
Not to be confronted by  
A student with a gun or a nervous breakdown,  
Or a girl who closes the door as she comes in.

The Old Guard sits in judgment and wears ties,  
Eying the New in proletarian drag,  
Where the Assistant with one lowered eyelid  
Plots against Tenure, dreaming of getting it;

And in the lobby, under the bulletin boards,  
The Baudelairean forest of posters  
For Transcendental Meditation, Audubon Group,  
“The Hunchback of Notre Dame,” Scientology,  
Arab Students Co- Op, “Case of the Curious Bride,”  
Two students munch upon a single sandwich.

How did Karl’s friends and colleagues feel about this all too apropos and witty text? I think most of us were delighted by it: certainly for quite some time it was prominently posted in precisely the “Humanities Building” lobby to which it alludes. It remained, indeed, in a place of honor among the “Baudelairean forest of posters” until some secret admirer – a student, a colleague, a cleaning person, who knows? – ripped it off.

Sandra M. Gilbert