

David Hamilton

AN INTERVIEW WITH GERALD STERN*

DH: Your father came from the Ukraine?

GS: Yes, my mother from Poland.

DH: Have you been to either place?

GS: No, but I'll be going to Poland this summer. I have a book in Polish that some people have translated, about thirty-five poems, and it's going to be coming out in July. I will be reading in Krakow, but I don't know Polish at all.

DH: What brought your parents here; were they being pushed?

GS: Oh, well they came in 1905, both in the same year, my mother was five, my father eight. They were the youngest in each of their families, so their older brothers and sisters were European. They were American, and Americans with a vengeance. They believed wholeheartedly in the new world.

DH: Did they lose their first languages?

GS: They never lost Yiddish. They lost the religion. That first generation was stripped bare, in all the cultures, unless I'm the first generation; I don't know what the sociologists say about that. I always felt that I was more their parents, my parents' parents, because I was more in touch with Europe. Late in life, after they had retired, my mother wanted to go to Europe and see Italy, see France; my father said, right out of the books, "I want to see America first." They never went back.

DH: He wanted to see California.

GS: California, the Rockies, whatever. They came in 1905. It was the year of a first revolution in Russia, which, coupled with the disaster of the Russo-Japanese War (1904-5), gave Russia a severe setback, and so of course you blame the Jews. In 1905, there was a huge Jewish immigration to America.

My maternal grandfather was a scholar, a rabbi, and very poor. He never learned English. My paternal grandfather set up a stogie factory in Pittsburgh; it was called Stern's Cigars. The Jews were very active at that time in the stogie business. Gomper, who organized the AFL-CIO, was his first union representative. My father told me that my grandmother, his mother, was resistant to coming to America. She was already in her late thirties, and she

* June 16, 1999, on my back porch.

had her whole world set up in the Ukraine. Grandfather said to her, "If you don't come, I'm going to run away to Allegheny." Allegheny was across the river. It's where Gertrude Stein was born, but it's really the north side of Pittsburgh. So here he was going to run away to Allegheny. She rushed to Bremerhaven, got a boat, came to America with my father, who was eight. That's what brought them to Pittsburgh.

DH: Then your mother's family got to Pittsburgh too.

GS: Yes, somehow they got there, and they met, I guess, when they were teenagers. Two things that happened to my father the first day that he arrived in Pittsburgh. He tells me this later. Two things he discovered. One was bananas. They sold bananas by the hand in those days. They called it the hand; it was like a stalk, and he ate about nine bananas. Of course he got sick. The other thing he saw were African Americans. And he said to my grandmother, to his mother, in Yiddish, *Sehe, Mama*. Look mother. *Ein Schwartz*, a black man. She said. *Schweig, mein Sohn*, Quiet, my son, in America they don't talk like that. So he got his first lesson in concealment and good manners at the age of eight. And his first lesson in eating bananas.

Stern's Cigars. I saw a picture: they had a wagon, it was pulled by a horse, and it said Stern's Cigars on it. Now my grandfather died young, in his late fifties, I never saw him. My father was twelve when his father died. The business was given to George—the oldest son in America; the oldest in the family stayed in Europe. George ran the business into the ground—gambling, girls, clothes, etc. They sold the patent of the cigar to a company in Wheeling, West Virginia, which is close to Pittsburgh, and it's called a Marsh-Wheeling. Every year I smoke one. They make them in a light and a dark tobacco—a terrible cigar. I choke to death on one each year, in memory of my grandfather whom I never saw.

DH: Let's talk a little bit about anger. I hear references to what could make one angry in your poems, but I don't hear that much anger itself. What seems more characteristic is to have gotten beyond the anger. You remember, from your early work, "When I Have Reached the Point of Suffocation," and how it ends, "It takes years to learn . . ."

GS: "how to look at the destruction / of beautiful things;"

DH: "to learn how to leave the place / of oppression;

GS: "and how to make your own regeneration / out of nothing." I wrote that poem in 1967. I was living on Klondike Street, an alley in Indiana, Pennsylvania, and teaching at the state college there. I had just come into my

“new poems,” they were for me new poems, started in the spring of 1966, and they were just writing themselves. I didn’t know where they were going. After years and years of going the wrong way, I was excited by these. Because I remember writing that poem and throwing it away. I threw it in the garbage. The next day, I woke up early saying to myself, “Maybe that poem’s okay,” and rushed out, just as a gigantic truck was coming down the street, and reached in—it had coffee stains on it, and grease and water—and retrieved that poem. And the reason—you would ask, why didn’t I trust the poem, or like the poem?—it seemed too literal to me, then. It seemed too obvious, too prose-like. I spent the first half of my life, as far as poetry is concerned, resisting literal statements, wanting everything to be symbolic, imagistic, rhetorical, beautiful—in the Marlovian sense, or in the Hart Crane sense. And I made that turn, I guess you would say, towards Williams, perhaps, towards Blake.

DH: There’s another poem of yours called “Fritz” where you make a reference to a turning point in your life: “I began / *my* journey in 1947,” you say. You would have been in your early 20s. “I wrote / four hours a day, I read five books a week. / I had to read five books.” Were you then wanting to write in this Marlovian, Cranian way?

GS: Absolutely. In that poem, I’m talking about a certain point in European and American history—1912 or 1914, perhaps it’s 1910—it’s a critical time, I think, in American literature and history. And I say in the poem, “we live off the rot” of that impulse. Then, because I’m thinking out loud, “I wonder if it’s true.” Then I refer to Fritz Kreisler. I saw him at the Carnegie Hall in Pittsburgh. He came to the front of the stage and played his sweet violin, which was unbearably beautiful; he was playing his own music. Then I say, the root of what we were in 1947 “was in the nineteenth century. . . / I’m lost without that century. There is / one movement left, *con amore*.” Then I talk about my own journey.

DH: The movement left could be the whole generation you’re in.

GS: That’s good, I never thought of that. I describe my own journey because I was an autodidact. I went to the University of Pittsburgh, I was a major in philosophy and political science. I took one course in English only, and so when I graduated I was writing poetry and reading and thinking and educating myself. “I wrote four hours a day, I read five books a week.” “I never knew / the right hand was raised like that,” I’m returning to Fritz. “I never knew / how trapped the body was”—I’m talking about the violin but

I'm also talking about our bodies—"I didn't believe / you gave yourself to the fire like that"—he's giving himself to the fire. I'm talking about myself giving myself to the fire . . .

DH: . . . to "the red coal."

GS: "After / a while—if the brain was in the fingers"—as it would be for Fritz—

the heart
was all that made the sound,
whatever I mean
by "sound," and that we have to start with feeling,
we poor machines—which stood me in good stead
for ten or twenty years,
that and Marlowe's tears and Coleridge's soft flight and
Dostoevski's
rack—it was the fire that moved me.

That's what got me going, that dream, that raving. But it was Marlowe, it was beauty. It was beauty, and for me it meant a discovery, a way of handling what I wanted to do in aesthetics rather than politics. For I had been very active in left-wing politics.

DH: As an organizer?

GS: Just joining organizations, going to meetings.

DH: This was right after World War II?

GS: Right after and during the war. Even as a student. When I was an undergraduate, it could be any extravagant thing, any reaction against power, authority, convention, complacency. I remember organizing the "Independents" at the University of Pittsburgh, trying to destroy the fraternities. No reason—it was just there to do. I remember standing on top of a chair in the dining room, making a speech. We used the debate club as our center of radical activities, and to control us, the university turned off the funds for the debate club. Well, that's what I was before I discovered writing and literature.

DH: One of the remarkable things about the Workshop, when it got going about the same time, was that it gave a place for other outsiders, Independents, many of them, to discover themselves as poets, as you were doing, though not here.

GS: Like Phil Levine. Like Donald Justice.

DH: Exactly. Out of the University of Miami, and . . .

GS: Donald and Philip come from the same place I did. We're all approximately the same age; Phil is a couple of years younger. But we're talking about the mid-fifties. I could have come to the Workshop. I knew that there was a thing called—I think there were two places then: Stanford and Iowa. For whatever reason, mostly out of fear and arrogance—the idea of going to a workshop—that seemed like such a ridiculous word to me. To sit down and have others look at your heart's blood and make critical comments on it—talk about the commas and the parenthetical clauses—and to say arrogantly, I would cut out this first stanza, or I'd add this. To have the gall to do that when I was being dictated to by a muse, at the side of a mountain, and was writing for Ben Jonson and for Marlowe.

What I'm saying was absolutely arrogant; it came out of fear. Maybe they're the same thing. Jack Gilbert and Richard Hazley, and I—the only poets in Pittsburgh—the three of us never showed poems to each other. For one thing, Gilbert wasn't writing poems. Hazley was and I was; Gilbert was going to write a novel. Later, when he went to Europe for the first time, he put "poet" in his passport. Then he started to write terrible, terrible poems. For years. But we never showed each other our work. What we did instead, we'd read every night in a little restaurant—there weren't any coffee shops—at the Webster Hall Hotel, Fifth Avenue, across from the University of Pittsburgh, and we would recite poetry. We would memorize poems all day. We'd talk about our favorite poets. In my case, Pound, Auden, Macleish, Jeffers, Cummings. And Keats, Blake. Not yet Williams and Stevens. Jack would do the same, though he was more interested in *fin de l'autre siècle* at the time—Swinburne, Pater. And Hazley was more interested in the Elizabethans, although he loved Hart Crane. He could recite hundreds of lines by heart. And Yeats. That's what we did every night. We would talk learnedly to each other. We were all running scared. We knew nothing. I was in my early twenties then.

DH: Writing four hours a day, reading five books a week, and reciting parts of them.

GS: I'm reading a book now, I think I mentioned to you a little while ago, a kind of biography of O'Hara. It's a well known biography. [*City Poet: The Life and Times of Frank O'Hara*, by Brad Gooch] And it's mostly gossip—it's a delightful book to read. I'm reading about O'Hara's relationship with Ashbery, with James Schuyler, with Ginsberg, and with all the painters, particularly Larry Rivers, and his connection with Long Island. All the time, whenever I

do this, I have a certain sadness, something of envy, in my mind. They went to Harvard, they had access to the newest information on the east coast. There was a description of a party that Ashbery gave at his little apartment I think on Twelfth Street between Fifth and Sixth. This was even before he won the Yale prize; he was twenty-three years old, twenty-five years old. I don't even know if he'd met Auden yet, but he threw a party. Of course O'Hara was there, wearing a black sweater and jeans rolled up, and tennis shoes, and also Delmore Schwartz and the *Partisan Review* crowd was there. It was amazing. Ashbery's my age. And where was I? In Pittsburgh, the other side of the Allegheny mountains. Pre-television. No connection, no access to information. Living in dirt, filth, darkness, ignorance. Maybe it was a blessing. Whatever it was, it was different, what I had.

What I did was rent a room for five dollars a week—that's what it cost then—and my poor parents, immigrants, wanting me to be a judge, or a lawyer, or something, and me making all A's, a brilliant student, highest honors, scholarships waiting for me everywhere, but I rented this room and got on the 52-20 club, which was a device that the government used for veterans to adjust to the civilian economy. They gave them twenty dollars a week for fifty-two weeks after World War II, and I was a veteran. I think of a line of Auden: "When I am a veteran with only one eye, / I will do nothing but look at the sky." I lived on this twenty dollars a week, which was easy, and I read books. Finally I figured, after a couple of years, I'll go to Columbia, where all the action is, where I'll really learn, where I'll get access to the light, the knowledge, the wisdom, on the other side of the Allegheny. So for eight dollars I took a bus to New York. I had the GI bill, and I went to Columbia for a couple of years.

Actually, I was highly disappointed when I went to Columbia.

DH: When did you join—what was it, the army?

GS: I was in two years. I was old enough to be drafted during the war—I tried to join when I was sixteen, seventeen, eighteen. I was bitter, I kept being turned down because of my eyes. Finally I gave up, and said, "Okay, I'm not going to be in this war." My friends were coming home, the war was over, they were coming back, they were twenty-one, I had already gone through college, I had one semester to go, and every year or so I'd be called down for an examination at the post office, where we'd parade around naked, right? This time they passed me. I said, "What do you mean? I have a date tonight." They said, "You're going tonight."

DH: And the war's over—

GS: I said, What are you talking about? and called my friends, "I'm going into the army tonight." They all laughed, they didn't believe me, and off I went to Fort Mead and a couple years in the army. Fruitless years. It was between World War II and the Korean War.

DH: A lot of people who came to Iowa in those early years came because of the GI Bill, too.

GS: Of course, it was a wonderful thing. In those days the GI Bill gave you enough money to live on. I was able to go to Europe on the GI Bill, and I spent my first year in Europe in France, mostly in Montpellier in the south of France. I made seventy-five dollars a month. Once a month, I went over to the embassy and got my check. You could live those days on a dollar a day. That's what got me to Europe.

DH: How long were you there?

GS: The first time a year. Then a couple years later, I went back for three years. I want to read you a new poem—about those years in Paris. Now, the reason I wrote this poem: I was reading Kenneth Koch. He has written a lot of poems recently which are name-dropping poems—"first time I met O'Hara," "when I was in Paris and met André Gide," and I got a little fed up with that and decided to write about my time in Paris. I must tell you about it, because it will add a certain richness to it.

In those days—we're talking 1949–1950—the official rate of exchange was 345 or so francs to a dollar, instead of seven or whatever it is now. But on the black market you could get 375. I cashed fifty bucks for a guy, on the black market. Of course being inquisitive and knowledgeable, being from Pittsburgh, I followed him, in the subway. He didn't know I was following him. He got off on the North Bank, he walked down Rue Rosier, which was the old Jewish quarter, and he went into a restaurant called Goldenberg's, which is still there, though it's a delicatessen now. It was bombed about fifteen years ago by some radical left-wing Palestinians, or Arabs. I waited till he came out, and I walked in. I sat down and ordered something—chopped liver, gefilte fish, whatever—and after a while a guy came over. He sat down and said, in broken English, or Yiddish, or French, "Are you American?" He wanted to make sure I wasn't a French policeman. He said, "If you ever get a typewriter, some clothes, money, we can do some business." This guy had been an architect in Poland—he was in Auschwitz. And I made a hundred dollars a week on the black market. I was a rich man.

Somebody would come over to Paris with a typewriter, to write the great American novel. A year would pass. He would meet a lover. He'd have one page written, ten pages, but needed to go back for his senior year. Was he going to carry this heavy object? It's this beautiful Underwood, this beautiful Royal. I'll give you thirty dollars for it. I'll give you twenty dollars—ten dollars I would start, and I'd end up at twenty-five; I sold it for a hundred. The guy I sold it to sold it for two hundred, because they still had not reached the point where they were manufacturing typewriters. So I sold clothes, I sold typewriters, etc. Here's the poem. It's called "Paris."

As I recall, the meal I ate was liver
with mashed potatoes. And out of simple courtesy
I kept what I could in my briefcase or half-hidden
under the table; I think an Underwood brought me
two months free living and the Polish architect
I sold it to whose teeth the Germans had smashed
at Auschwitz it gave him seven months at least,
depending on other forces. The whole thing
lasted maybe a year for by my reckoning
when I was ready to leave the stores were already
full of new things and they were cleaning the bridges
and polishing the squares. My own time
was somewhere between the Ordeal and the Recovery,
but there was food enough. The one thing
I remember about him we had the same
name in Hebrew though I don't know what he was called
in Polish—I hope not Gerald—we always walked
after lunch and stopped for coffee. By my
reckoning he was in his forties. I went
to Italy on that money, it was my first
grant, a little hopeless by later standards,
but that only made it easier to practice
deprivation—in one or two years—ketchup
with beans, seven pounds of lamb for a dollar,
bread eight cents a loaf. It was
more loyal that way, I was so stubborn I did it
ten years too long, maybe twenty, it was
my only belief, what I went there for.

That's my Paris, there's no André Gide in this poem.

Those were wonderful days. On the way over—this is gossip but it's fun—I met a guy named Marty Fleer. That's a wonderful name for a con artist anyway. Marty Fleer. Marty was on his way to Paris to start a newspaper, the *Paris Post*. It existed for a few, five years maybe, and was going to be in competition with the *Herald*, which still is there of course. He was going to do advertisements and make money. But he needed somebody to write the columns and the articles and to be the editor. So a friend of mine named Howard Kirshwin, who lived in the same building I did and who was a journalist and later worked for the State Department, and I agreed to write the substance of the newspaper. It was maybe twelve pages. We wrote the newspaper in my room. We made up names and had fake interviews. I remember interviewing the Spanish Surrealist painter, Dali, who just got off the *Liberté*, and I interviewed him in Normandy. Of course this never happened. I wrote under various names.

DH: So Ashbery, Koch, and friends put out *Locus Solus*, and you wrote this newspaper.

GS: Right, in my room, in the Hotel de Centre, on Rue de Gucherie, in the old Arab quarter, which has been since gentrified. A wonderful miserable hotel from the days of Henri IV.