

## An Interview with Gerald Stern\*

DH: Maybe we can call this “Going Forth and Forth.”

GS: I like going forth and forth.

DH: Well, it’s a line of yours I like too and we can try to earn it. What poet have you memorized most? Who do you have most lines of by heart?

GS: I suspect . . . I suspect Yeats. Used to be Auden, some Hart Crane. Before that it was Marlowe. Not a lot of Shakespeare for some reason or other.

DH: I was surprised when I noticed Marlowe mentioned in your verse.

GS: I remember the joy with which I used to read *Tamburlaine*, both parts, and of course *Dr. Faustus*. I just adored Marlowe: there was brilliance. It was pure, intense music, unadulterated, unashamed, the poetry of a young man, a Keats, a Hart Crane. The man was unashamedly . . . unashamedly a poet, unashamedly an intellectual, unashamedly a kind of ideologue. Far ahead of his time. Whereas Shakespeare is everybody’s priest. Marlowe forces you to disagree or agree with him because of that fierce intense philosophical position, so to speak, I mean both in language and ideas. But it was the pure poetry, the lines that just came back to you, over and over again, to haunt you.

DH: But Yeats too. I guess I’m not surprised at Yeats.

GS: And Cummings. You know, when I was in my early twenties two of the poets I read then, I don’t think people read them as much now, were MacLeish and Cummings, also as I think about it, Gerard Manley Hopkins and Dylan Thomas.

DH: The warm blooded poets that stir us.

GS: Yeah.

DH: And in the generation just before you, did you correspondingly go for Roethke more than for Lowell?

GS: You know that’s such a good question, such a relevant question. I remember I was in Europe in the mid-fifties with Pat. We lived for three years there. We gave ourselves twenty-five dollars a week. In some places, like France, that was hard, and in places like Austria it was very easy. I was studying the American poets, trying to decide what to do, where to go.

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\* Interviewed by David Hamilton 9/20/88

Should I write rhymed verse, should I write renewed Donne, and deal in conceits, and super-conceits, should I go back and try to rediscover the self in a different way? And I reduced the generation before me, if I could call it that, to two people, Lowell and Roethke, and after a while I dismissed Lowell, not that I didn't love his poetry – I still do – but I was bored with Lowell. Lowell's family doesn't interest me. And Lowell doesn't go in a significant way beyond his family, even in his politics. It was Roethke. There was Berryman, but Berryman's major work didn't appear till ten years later.

I was reading Roethke this summer. I was re-writing an essay that is going to be published in a collection. It is about memory and nostalgia. I have been obsessed with the issue of nostalgia and memory, like many other poets, like many other human beings, all my life. It's important in my poetry. But in re-writing the essay I began to re-think certain things, and to change certain positions I had and strategies in the writing of the essay. Not just cleaning things up, but changing my mind. And there were two poets in particular that I paid attention to. One was Wordsworth, obviously. The other was Roethke. And I read several books on each of them in connection with the issue of memory and nostalgia and trying to make distinctions between the two and definitions about what they are. I discovered what I should have known anyhow, that Roethke was deeply influenced by Wordsworth. He was particularly influenced by *The Prelude*. And here's *The Prelude*, that's been sitting there on our shelves, accumulating dust, you know, for a hundred years now, a hundred and thirty years. Unless you take the first version and it's almost a hundred and eighty years, the 1805 or 1807 version. I had read *The Prelude* maybe once. We all did. If you would ask us twenty years later or thirty years later what was it like we would say, "It was a moving poem, interesting, in a way original, a little monotonous, and one day I'll re-read it." But I was forced, or I forced, myself to re-read it and was astounded by the richness in that poem. It's as if it still hasn't been tapped. Okay, it's the story of the development of the poet's mind. It's a mystic confrontation with nature. But what struck me this time, and of course other critics have noticed this, Bloom for example, Abrams for example, is that it is an astoundingly revolutionary poem that anticipates and influences, though he would hate to admit it, Ezra Pound's *Cantos*, because *The Cantos* has the same subject. It's the development of the poet's mind. What is the central

figure in *The Cantos*? It's Pound's mind. What is the central figure in *The Prelude*? It's Wordsworth's mind; except Wordsworth was there first. We still haven't gotten beyond *The Prelude*. Stylistically, other ways, yes, but in a basic way *The Prelude* dominates us, dominates Joyce in a way, but it's a quiet domination. It's not like Dante. It's not like late Shakespeare, it's not like Milton.

DH: Is there a poet that you read repeatedly, every year or so?

GS: I guess it's two poets . . . maybe three. Pound, *The Cantos*, and the late Yeats. And Hart Crane. It's funny when you talk to a poet about whom he reads and who influences him—they aren't always the same thing. A poet that I read endlessly in my early twenties was Auden. I adored Auden. I thought about Auden as my proper master. For years I did. Well, really I was reading Rimbaud, in translation and in French, and again Marlowe and those others that I've mentioned: Roethke and Cummings, and early Pound, Eliot, and late Yeats . . . and Shakespeare, and Blake. And Ben Jonson. I've always adored Ben Jonson, I used to carry around with me a little volume of Ben Jonson's poems, some of them songs from the plays, some of them poems themselves. And I read him and still read him with joy. I don't know why, he doesn't fit into the kind of tradition I've been describing.

DH: Those moving epitaphs.

GS: Yeah, the poems to his son, the songs.

DH: The one to the daughter where he says, "cover lightly gentle earth," as if you're pulling the baby blanket up over the child. It brings tears.

GS: But Auden . . . I read Auden, and knew several poems by heart. "Some think they're strong, some think they're smart / America can break your heart." No, how does it go? "Some think they're strong, some think they're smart / like butterflies they're pulled apart / America can break your heart / you don't know all sir, you don't know all." I love to read Auden. I didn't have a consistent philosophical or aesthetic understructure, superstructure. I was badly put together, critically.

DH: Certainly with no hostility to rhyme and formal verse.

GS: Oh not at all. I loved it and still do love it. Half of the poems I was writing in the early fifties were in rhyme. And I had a rhyming dictionary. I used it so much that the top cover was torn off and the first pages were exposed; they started to weather and ripped, the way they do. That's when I gave myself over to free verse. I wrote some interesting poems in rhyme. I was pretty good at it.

DH: I notice in the first two or three volumes of yours, up through *The Red Coal* anyway, quite a few lines, not whole poems certainly, but stretches of three, four, six lines that are loose iambic lines.

GS: You know, in a funny way that was a relaxation and a return. If you look in the earlier volume, the volume called *Rejoicings*—which are poems collected over a period of five to seven years roughly between the ages of thirty-nine and forty-five—there I had fiercely broken away or deliberately broken away from the iambic line, or the decasyllabic line, and was writing a longer line, influenced by Whitman, by Blake, by the Bible and by Bly, to a certain degree, as well as some poems in the alternative kind of experiment that was going on at that time—the William Carlos Williams line. But before that I had been writing, for a period of seven years, one of my astoundingly long, failure poems called “The Pineys.” That was written in iambics. It had more syllables, but it was iambic. And the whole poem was three thousand lines or so. In *Lucky Life* and in *The Red Coal*, when I’m relaxed and I’m just carrying on a narrative or carrying on a discourse, I move to a natural mode of speech, or it has become the natural mode of speech for me—a loose decasyllabic line, an iambic line.

DH: “How young he felt in his first pair of boots.”

GS: “How young he felt in his first pair of boots.”

DH: Yes, there are stretches like that.

GS: Yeah, there’s a passion in me for form. I’ve been carrying on a correspondence recently with Robert Mezey. Mezey says, “I look at those poems and know you’re straining at the leash and want to get into rhyme; I notice in your rhyme you want to get into stanzaic forms,” and so on. I don’t agree with Bob. But there is in me a desire for form.

DH: The Psalms seem like more the form behind your poems than anything else I can put my finger on.

GS: That’s probably right. I never thought of it that way.

DH: Whitman, of course. People are always mentioning you as a late-twentieth century Whitman, but it seems to me that the parallelisms and the anaphora and the repetition of phrase units . . .

GS: . . . and the quick shifting that you see in the Psalms . . .

DH: And the kind of celebration.

GS: And the celebration. And the move from the personal to the political, or the personal to the religious. The personal to the cosmic, even. And in addition the movement, the radical movement, from deep melancholy and

pessimism to amazing optimism in just (snaps his fingers) a few seconds.  
DH: I wondered what your favorite books of the Bible are, because I would have guessed the Psalms and Lamentations, but I hear you mentioning the prophets, Amos, Ezekiel.

GS: Again we are talking about the writers that you think are your big influences, as opposed to the ones who truly are. You know it may be that the writers that are your great influences—you just read them once, thirty years ago, or looked at two lines or something like that. I'm exaggerating. But the ones that you read and read and memorize may not be the influence. Well, extending that to my reading of the scriptures, I love Ezekiel. I guess I love the mysticism of Ezekiel. The "wheels within wheels," and the eschatology. Ezekiel and Isaiah. You know just yesterday I was reading Lamentations. But I'm writing about ruins in my own poetry, thinking about ruins, and I'm thinking about ruin in my life. What a wonderful place to go for ruin . . . Lamentations. There is a fantastic new translation of the Hebrew scriptures—the Tanakh—that's just come out a year or so ago. I found out about it from a young friend in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, Peter Waldor, who's been studying it. It's like reading the whole thing afresh. I'm going to get into that and I'm going to re-read Ezekiel and re-read Isaiah.

DH: Was your childhood given in large part to regular observances of Judaism?

GS: We were conservative, a strange word. Orthodox, Conservative, Reformed. I guess Conservative is a kind of cop-out. Reform is a true idea, a philosophical idea, but conservative Judaism is something in the middle: it's a little of this, a little of that. It can always be modulated. Is there too much Hebrew? We'll add a little more English. Is there not enough pork? A little bite of bacon's okay, but no pork itself. My dear mother, my darling mother who's now eighty-eight years old . . . I remember at a certain point in her life it was okay to eat bacon, since it is an abstraction. But she would never eat pork. I mean a pork roast. It comes from the same damn animal. But she would eat bacon. Totally illogical, and of course it's well-known that compromising bourgeois Jews will go and eat Chinese food on Sunday night. There are a thousand Woody Allen jokes about it, food full of everything that's forbidden in Deuteronomy. I'm not being critical of them. Well, maybe, just a little. Maybe it's the dragons they like.

DH: Well, it's comic, at least.

GS: It's comic. I grew up in that tradition. Although earlier, when my grandmother lived with us, my mother's mother, before she re-married, we were Orthodox. Everybody was Orthodox, there wasn't a conservative movement in Bialastock or Kiev. We had two sets of dishes. One for, you know, dairy foods, and the other for meat dishes. We had a separate sets of dishes for Passover, that were unearthen and unpacked and cleaned and prepared for that holiday. And everything else, candles, whatever. We lived for three or four years, as I recall, in an Orthodox house. There, under my grandmother's supervision.

DH: Going to services regularly as well?

GS: Going to services regularly. I went every day to Chedar from the time I was about five, Monday through Thursday for about two hours each day, from four to six, or from a quarter to four to a quarter to six, to prepare for my Bar Mitzvah. We learned Hebrew and then Friday night we went to services. Friday night services, which were always a little looser, a little less formal, a little more informal, a little more English, than Saturday morning services which were more formal. Almost every Saturday there was a Bar Mitzvah, followed with candy bars, everybody got candy bars. I used to have a friend who wasn't Jewish who'd come to the services for the candy bars! And the singing of all the songs. I did that on Saturday, and then on Sunday I went to Sunday School.

DH: Which was instruction?

GS: In English. In the Bible. When you were very little, Biblical tales and what have you . . . then later on a little bit more theory, theology.

DH: Then you knew a fair amount of Hebrew from the ritual?

GS: I knew Hebrew from the service and some has still hung on. To my embarrassment, I never really learned Hebrew as an adult. I tried several times. Once, I was spending the year in Scotland, I decided to study Hebrew. When I go to foreign countries, I feel I should be in Israel, not necessarily *that* Israel, but in *Israel*, the metaphysical Israel. So that two years ago I was in Greece . . . I was on the island of Samos, which is the island of one of my teachers, Pythagoras . . . I was sitting on a porch trying to learn the Greek ideograms, the characters. I was determined that I was going to learn Greek. You know Ben Gurion learned demotic Greek before he died?

DH: No, I didn't know that.

GS: Yeah. I'm memorizing the signs and suddenly I said to myself, "What in the hell am I doing in this mountain village, beautiful as it is, a thousand miles away from anything, studying this strange language, when I should get on a plane, one of those little Olympia airplanes and fly over to Israel and learn Hebrew, really learn Hebrew, which is the other language, on the other side of the Matthew Arnold polarity. Or the Lionel Trilling one.

DH: Not to mention the other side of the Aegean.

GS: Not to mention. So that's exactly what I did. When I get into a foreign context, suddenly Hebrew, or the Yiddish world, opens up to me. When I was in Scotland, I was twenty-five, I was twenty-six. I was teaching at a high school in Glasgow. It was called Victoria Drive Senior Secondary High School. And I was teaching English—can you believe this?—and English history. One day I gave a lecture on the American Revolution which had one paragraph devoted to it in the book I was using, called "The War of American Independence." And I tried to tell them what it meant to us. They couldn't understand, they weren't even interested. But while I was there I decided to learn Hebrew. Why study poems in literary Scots by Christopher Grieve—what is the name he took?—Hugh McDiar-mid. And why learn Gaelic—of course made available in the high schools for those who wanted—why not learn Hebrew? But how could I learn Hebrew in Glasgow, they've got eight Jews in Glasgow. So I got out a book, found a text, I bought it somewhere, and it was a text done in terms of Greek grammar for study in theological seminaries. Of course I didn't know Greek. How I worked through it I don't know, but somehow I worked through it, as much of it as I could, and then we, Pat and I, went from Scotland to France. When I got into France, French took over and for the next three years, maybe it was for the next thirty-three years, or forty-three years, I forgot about Hebrew. But now I'm thinking about Yiddish. Now I'm thinking a lot about Yiddish.

DH: Is French the language, other than English, that you've come closest to speaking or had most experience speaking?

GS: Yeah . . . and you know I spent more time in France, I think, than in any other foreign country. But I never could get into French. I don't know why. Maybe others have had this experience. It's always from the head. I know Italian much less than I know French but I feel more at home in the Italian language, though I don't know the vocabulary, or really the

language as well as I do French. And German, which I know probably even less, well about as well as I know Italian, because of its similarity to English, and more important, because of its similarity to Yiddish, not similarity but identity to Yiddish—as soon as I know the words and constructions in German, I know the poetry. I can appreciate the poem in German almost as well, or just about as well, as I can a poem in English.

DH: And better than one in French.

GS: I can't do that in French. I can't do that in Italian. But I can do it in German. I think it's because English is German. But I think it's also, as I say, because Yiddish is German. It's the German spoken in the tenth and eleventh centuries in the Rhine Valley, as I recall, from the research that I've done over the years. You know how poets do research.

DH: Like some of the rest of us, there's a little accident and aimlessness and luck and holes in it.

GS: Right, exactly. But they also . . . I'm changing the subject . . . they also, or I, I shouldn't say they—I don't know if Donald Justice or Phil Levine or Galway Kinnell does this or not. But I . . . I'm a scholar manqué.

DH: Your master Auden was like that and wrote about the young poet at college and how there's no particular pattern to what he should learn—almost anything could be helpful. He could go anywhere and anything could be interesting; there's no rule.

GS: He's absolutely correct. And that's what we should be telling our young writers. Maybe that's the way we should study English, and history too!

DH: Well, at any rate Auden was listening to Tolkien at the time and listening to Old English. But your discipline is writing more poems, not writing monographs on whatever subject.

GS: I wrote that poem on the Pine Barrens of southern New Jersey, "The Pineys." And at a certain point—I hope this doesn't sound arrogant—I thought I knew more about the Pine Barrens than anybody in the world. Until John McPhee came along. I thought that was the only . . .

DH: The only competition you had.

GS: The only competition I had . . . but my ambition at the time was not to know the Pine Barrens but to experience it so that I could write the poem about it.

DH: I wish I'd known your poem earlier because I used to drive through the Pine Barrens and I read McPhee and roamed around a little bit and loved it.

GS: I went up and down all those rivers. Climbed the hills. The one thing I couldn't do, there was a fire tower in a place called Penns Woods. I know Penns Woods is in Pennsylvania too. But this was called by the same name. It was one of the state forests. There is in the Pine Barrens a giant tract of land called the Wharton Tract, named of course after the famous Philadelphia Wharton. Within the Wharton Tract there are different degrees of state control. In one of those state forests is a fire tower. It's the highest point in the Pine Barrens—I think seven hundred feet above sea level. I was determined to do everything, but the one thing I couldn't do, for I had a terrible fear of heights, though it's lessened somewhat over the years, I couldn't climb the fire tower. I was living in Philadelphia then, and drove into the Pine Barrens with a friend of mine named Al Barber, a former student, a painter. Al is a wonderful guy but he is legally blind—in Pennsylvania, at that time, he was legally blind. He lives in Brooklyn now—I don't know if he's legally blind in Brooklyn. That means he can see OK, but he couldn't read and he was blind enough that he could get a pension, and he couldn't drive a car. Al, unlike me, had no fear of heights, so I sent the bastard up. "What do you see, Al?" I shouted. "I can't see!" I mean there we were, a guy with a fear of heights and a blind man, the crow and the fox.

DH: So you could fill in whatever you wanted to.

GS: That's been my experience with the poem . . . in the area of research. That got us off the subject because we were into something else.

DH: Well . . . let's circle around a moment to form as you were talking about it earlier in that phrase of yours we started with, "going forth and forth." It seems to me that one formal impulse in your poetry might be described by finding how far forth you can go. You begin with a line, I don't know where you begin—but the poem becomes an adventure in how far you can extend that utterance, that reflection.

GS: I do different things. In many of the poems in *Lovesick*, particularly in the second part of *Lovesick*, I start with a phrase or a line and I literally don't know where that's going to take me. It is the music that takes me. Well, when a poet talks about music, and I hope I'm speaking for others as well as myself, it's not like a musician talking about music; he says it's music that takes me—she says it's music that takes her—she means it's the music of poetry, which is the language, which is always language, not just the sound of the language, but the meaning of the words. That's part of

the music. So when I say that, when I say that it's the music that takes me, to a certain degree I'm saying it's the ideas that take me.

DH: As in that last poem, "Steps," a beautiful poem I think, where you go up and up and up . . .

GS: I don't know where I'm going.

DH: And there are different ways you can go up. Going up becomes a metaphor for continuation, I suppose, maybe for writing the poem. Going in, maybe, as well as going up. I don't know.

GS: Yes, when I started that poem I had no idea how long it was going to be, I had no idea where it would go. Oh this is true of any poem to a certain degree. It's true of a sonnet; one of the joys of writing a poem is to surprise yourself. To be delighted in what wonderful lines you are going to create, in ten minutes, or ten days from now, that are forced upon you by the exigencies of rhyme, or rhythm or meaning. And what a delight that is, to discover that you had that, you know, in your little repository somewhere.

DH: That you were unconscious of.

GS: Right. But, that's always true. I'm saying something a little different that includes that too, that I literally didn't know how long the poem was going to be, what would possess me. I operated in a kind of faith that I was truly being blessed, or that the muse was present, or that this was a poem. I say an act of faith, it's kind of a feeling—I have this and I suspect that all poets do—you know when a poem is present. Sometimes you're searching for the poem to be born. Sometimes it doesn't come forth and you continue to struggle with the birth, and it's stillborn. For a long time—and sometimes for days and sometimes for years, though your better side knows that you can't let it go, you don't want to lose that child. You don't want to lose those ten beautiful lines. But that poem is not a poem yet. I've learned to let that poem rest, and it will be born in a different way. Or it won't be born, which is just as well. Think of how many million angels there are. We each of us have forty or fifty thousand angels following us. Each of us. You have 39,720 angels around you, but you don't see them all. Well. So I start out. I have confidence and hope that it is a poem. I don't know till the last line whether or not I'm going to throw it away or not and I may spend months trying. I may have three hundred lines, or a hundred and thirty lines. And I go on. I go forth and forth.

Two poems that I could compare from that book are “Knowledge Forwards and Backwards” and an earlier poem called “Béla.” I think those are two of the more intricate poems of that book. “Béla” has a subject. “Béla” is about, you know, Béla Bartók writing his last piece, the great concerto, and about Koussevitsky visiting him in the hospital where he’s dying of leukemia. It’s about *something* . . . I knew in advance of writing that poem, or after I had written the first stanza or two, where it would go, more or less. There was music and there was structure and there was form, personal destiny, and a lot of other things that came into play. But I had a sense of what the poem was going to be about because I identified so personally with Béla. In the writing of the poem, during the course of that, I was . . . I had a bad back. This was three years ago, four years ago, here in Iowa City. And I was writing at the time on the second floor of a house I was living in, I had that poem half-finished. I used to literally crawl up those stairs to try to finish that poem because, in my crazy way, and I was crazy for a couple months, I thought if I could only finish this poem my back would get better, an example of the ritual acts that poets do; if I could touch that tree, if I could find a snowball, if I could eat a piece of rye bread from my grandmother’s youth, an unfertilized egg, whatever . . . cottage cheese with catsup the way Nixon did. I would crawl up those steps and my back would be better. I was in excruciating pain.

DH: I remember that.

GS: I would sit down, I would turn the music on, because that’s where my music system was, upstairs, and try to listen to that poem — I mean listen to myself try to write that poem. I couldn’t, I would become nauseated. Part of the problem was it was a difficult poem and it required a lot of labor and energy and I couldn’t muster energy for a poem at the time. The only energy I could muster was to try to withstand the pain. In a most literal sense that’s what was going on, although in my crazy way I had converted it to something mystical and metaphysical. When my back got better, or mostly better, I crawled up, or I walked up the stairs and finished the poem in about three hours, the last half of the poem. Almost as quickly as I could write. But that poem — we’ve changed the subject — that poem is a poem where I knew half in advance where I was going. I knew what I had to do. I would jot lines down as one does; these will be the last lines: she will go into the sunroom, the wife, the young wife, she will dream of, she will think about, the apartment, make sure you men-

tion such and such, the shawl. But in “Knowledge Forwards and Backwards,” which is the other kind of poem, and I may be exaggerating the difference between the two, I wasn’t doing that at all. I had no idea that when I started to write that poem I would end up in front of the Quaker Inn in Ocean Grove, New Jersey, marching down the street with some shriners, as I recall, and singing songs in three or four languages . . .

DH: So you were never making notes ahead.

GS: Not in that poem. I had no idea where I was going in that poem. I had no idea. By the way, that poem may not be, if you will, *about* anything. In the sense that “Béla” is about something. “Béla” is about the death of Béla Bartók.

DH: “Knowledge Forwards and Backwards” is an abstraction and you can fill in all sorts of things. You can’t get away from Bartók so easily.

GS: Yes exactly . . . so “Knowledge” is disconnected in a certain way. It’s not altogether an un-Ashberian poem.

DH: It’s not just Ashbery either. Those principles have been around most of the century, of disconnectedness and breaking narrative.

GS: Yeah, we see it in Mallarmé and we see it in Stevens and Crane.

DH: We see it in fiction too.

GS: We saw it in Wordsworth in *The Prelude*, my darling.

DH: Maybe in *Antony and Cleopatra* . . . you know, rather than four or five scenes to an act, you’d have eleven.

GS: Right. The violation. The great gift of American and English literature: violation, wildness. Do you know that—I’m trying to remember who I was reading about yesterday—Was it Thompson or Cooper?—went to Italy and didn’t like the Italians because they were too unemotional.

DH: Really?

GS: Yeah, they were too constrained. How things have changed. I mean, there’s a wildness to the English that’s not acknowledged. My own guess is that in their great period, certainly in the Elizabethan period, and maybe as late as the Romantic period, that the English were wild and emotional. I think Sir Walter Raleigh was a wild man. Emotional, sensitive, delicate. Italianate, politic . . .

DH: And it must have started earlier, at least with the late fourteenth century Langland, the Gawain poet, then Chaucer—all coming in, and those wonderful lyrics, all at the same time.

GS: That had to come out of a culture. This poetry . . . that was incredibly diverse and rich and powerful. You see it as late as Wordsworth, or Dickens. London, the great city. When did the blandness enter into the English spirit? We take it as a given. We talk about English food being bland, English spirit being dull, we talk about Anglos with contempt. I wonder if blandness is not consanguineous with imperialism. If the true English spirit is not something more like the Welsh and Irish and Scottish.

DH: And would survive in the later Victorian period in Hopkins and Hardy and people like that . . .

GS: Right. Absolutely.

DH: . . . who are not exactly bland spirits, you know, but lyrical. Somehow I was just thinking of your "Lyric."

GS: I guess that's a pure lyric because it's not really about anything; it's about itself. I love that poem. It's one of my favorites from *Lovesick*. I don't know why I like it. I mean I like it because it's radical, because I'm standing beside some bushes, taking a piss. That poem is written in the backyard of my friends' house, Howard Rogovan and Gretchen Caracas, the painters, who live here in Iowa City. There are four or five poems that I wrote in their house, "Knowledge Forwards and Backwards," "A Garden," "No Longer Terror," . . . poem after poem I wrote in that wonderful little house that I rented from them, an apartment in their house. And their spirit, I adore those people.

DH: They're free people, compared to most.

GS: Yeah they are. They're wonderful people. I had this experience the other day with Howard. I was visiting them, Howard and Gretchen. I hadn't seen them for over a year and we were having some coffee and wine and cheese and Howard walked me to the front door, and there was my new car. I had a Honda, the new Honda which we drove this morning. He said, "What is that, a new car, Jerry?" I said, "Yeah." He said, "Well, what happened to the old one?" I said, "Well, I was having some trouble." He said, "How much did a car like that cost you?" I was ashamed to tell my dear friend Howard how much a new car cost. I said, "A new car like that costs seven or eight thousand dollars." He said, "Seven or eight thousand dollars for a car!" Meaning eight hundred is high.

DH: They spend half of each year making art in Ibiza and don't worry much about cars. Why don't you read the poem, "Lyric"?

GS: I wonder who has pissed here  
and stared—like me—at those wild petunias  
or touched a purple leaf from that small pear tree.  
Has anyone lain down here  
beside those red peppers  
or under those weak elm withers  
standing in shame there?

Dear God of that grape,  
has anyone snapped off a little curlicue  
to see if it's wood or wire  
or stripped the bark off those thick vines  
and leaned against that broken fence?

Has anyone put some old parsley in his mouth  
to see what the taste is  
or lifted a rose mum to his face  
to see if he'll live forever?

DH: I think that's "going forth and forth" in another way, looking into the particulars, that little bit about the curlicue from the grape, is it vine, is it wire, or tasting the parsley . . .

GS: And the parsley was there . . . and the grape . . . the only thing that wasn't there, I don't remember if the chrysanthemum was there. Everything else was there, everything as I describe it. The petunias were there, the purple leaf from the small pear tree, that was there, the red peppers were there, the grape, of course the wonderful purple grape arbor is there, and you know, those tiny little curlicues, they look like wire.

DH: Yes they do.

GS: But they're real wood. That was all there, as well as the broken fence and the parsley. But I'll have to check it out this afternoon because we're getting into chrysanthemum season already, if indeed there were chrysanthemums, maybe there weren't, it doesn't matter. But you're right, I make the poem out of the particulars.

DH: Your essays that I've been reading recently do too. You talk about all sorts of things but you seem to rely again and again on describing where you are, getting into the place in detail as if the detail is going to . . .

maybe trigger the muse? Is that a way of courting . . .

GS: That is exactly correct. I thought of that when I was just reading this poem. What I have is an absolute faith in the particulars, that they will make the poem. Well, the poem is there because—what is it, the hairs rise on my neck. I have that feeling of presence, of the poem, that it is there, so I stand there. Then with that faith, all I have to do is reach out, all I have to do is describe the things. Now I make it sound easy but there's labor involved and I don't remember the writing of that poem, whether it came easy or hard, whether I labored over it, whether I should have done some research at the library, or, this part I don't remember, I suspect that . . .

DH: But it's a faith in realism, isn't it? It's a faith in the world as luminous . . .

GS: It's a faith in life. It's a faith in the presence of meaningful things, even if temporarily meaningless. Even if transient, even if they'll not be understood ever again, even if they won't ever reappear in that same order. There was order. There was form. There was love. There was joy. There was meaning. There was life, whether for a minute or a year or a century. And that's enough. That's about all we're going to get of Paradise. Maybe I'll change my vision. I used to dream of some kind of communist or socialist utopia, god knows what I dreamed of, something half built out of the scriptures, half built out of third generation readings of Marxist philosophers, half out of 1930s socialism, out of Yiddish dreams, god knows what. But now I think you get moments . . . you know what Wordsworth called "spots of time," moments of ecstasy, moments of joy, moments of meaning and moments . . . you know I guess we wouldn't appreciate meaning unless we lived in meaninglessness. Those of us who've been lucky, or unlucky enough to have been temporarily terrorized or insane or off our rocker, whatever you want to call it, would remember those moments from time to time, what it was to have meaning in life, would long for that. I think that the insane person longs for meaning as I'm sure he remembers it from time to time. And the poet, the poem, gives, the work of art, gives us meaning. I mean pure meaning. If you asked me, "Do I think that the universe is logical and orderly and meaningful?" I'd say, "Probably not." Or then, I think of some of my friends who are physicists and I'd say, "On a deeper level, yes." But maybe that poem, and poems like that, that I and other people write, are as much as anything else a temporary sanity. Maybe all we can get is temporary san-

ity. You know, like they say, “People are temporarily insane”—poets are temporarily sane. I have many friends who are poets that are a little crazy, I can start naming them.

DH: That’s a nice notion, temporarily sane.

GS: Yes it is. *You’re doomed to prison for being temporarily sane.* That’s why in Stalinist days people were sent to Siberia, for being temporarily sane.

DH: Do you write very regularly, I mean, daily, or how do you go about being “temporarily sane?”

GS: Well, I keep changing my life so I don’t have any consistent habits. I keep waiting, and I’m in my sixties, I keep waiting to settle down and have an orderly life. But I tend to write my poems, I tend to do my writing early in the morning. I get up, 6:30, 7:00, unless I go to bed very late or am up all night, then I sleep till 8:30 or so—but I tend to write in the morning. But then, once I’m into a poem, I get obsessed by it, and I tend to write all the time. I hate things that interrupt, such as paying bills, paying taxes, teaching classes, going to the library, doing research, joining committees, giving readings, talking to people, all the things, eating, cleaning your house . . .

DH: Do you write in longhand, do you write on a typewriter?

GS: I write in longhand on legal pads. Although I have a giant roll of butcher’s paper and sometimes, particularly if the poem is long, as in “Béla” or “Knowledge Forwards and Backwards,” I let the whole poem appear on a piece of paper as if it were a painting. I pin it to the wall so I can see it from all sides and also that butcher paper is a little wider so I can put my notes and my variations of lines and words in the margins and have it all together in one jumble. And I save some of that stuff and god knows it’s wild, lines going upside down. So I do that, or I write on yellow tablets in longhand, and for me, typing it out is the final version. I make a few changes. As I go on I make fewer and fewer changes in my writing. In my essays I’ve reached a point now where I can just about write the final version the first time. That is, I can seek it out, seek the dynamics out, and more or less write it. I think the next stage that I’m going to try is typing it out as the first step. I labor and labor and labor though I write more quickly now than I used to.

DH: Does that mean that part of revision is just throwing away and starting with something else?

GS: It could mean a number of things. It could mean that I don’t think

that it's important to have the great good line as I once thought. When I first started writing, when I was in my mid to late twenties, I thought that every single line had to be perfect, thus Marlowe, thus Hart Crane. It had to be beautiful music, lines that I could be proud of on Parnassus when I met Ben Jonson. Now I am not interested in that. I'm interested in the whole poem. I'm interested in the narrative, in the dynamics, in the story, in the structure, in the strategy, in the joke. Ben would understand.

DH: Why do I think now of that exuberant poem you wrote about going into New York and seeing that show . . .

GS: Yes. It's called "The Picasso Poem." I love Picasso's last paintings. I'm so pleased that some of the critics have finally come to appreciate Picasso's very last paintings. I remember when the show was in New York about eight years ago, was it, ten years ago. In that poem, I imagined that I was the age, no, that Picasso was the age I was when I was writing that poem, and I think that I was fifty-six, or fifty-five. So I imagined where Picasso was then, and it was in the 1930s, so then I transported myself into the 1930s, me, not Picasso, driving a 1936 Pontiac across Route 22 into New York City. Of course, what do I go to see? The Picasso Show. When I talk about it, it's crazy. Temporary sanity. That's what was going on in that poem. But I remember at that time many of the reviewers criticized the last paintings. Those very large, simple, grotesque cartoons that were very sexual, and mythical and sad, and a little mad, of the late Picasso. I loved those last paintings. I'd say to my friends, who are painters, "Those are the best, I love them." And they'd say, "It's too bad you're not a painter, you don't understand." But now I see the view has turned a little bit. The art critics are finally catching up to me.

DH: There's a German word for that, isn't there, the *altenstil* of the musician, or the poet or perhaps the painter, that cuts loose at the end, or allows himself, herself . . .

GS: Is that the word, *altenstil*? Old style. Style of old age.

DH: I think so.

GS: I look forward to forty or fifty years from now when that's going to happen to me.

DH: But you're thinking of a kind of purity in Picasso . . .

GS: Purity. When you can do what you want. When you can let go. When you're not inhibited. When you can say, "Hey, am I going to wait till I'm ninety years old?" At a certain point I have to say what I believe in.

What I think, what I feel, what I like, and consequently, what I dislike and exclude. And that's a wonderful time, a wonderful feeling, when you can come to do that.

DH: Something that Emily Dickinson — you were alluding to her awhile back — had in her thirties.

GS: When I went to Europe two years ago the only poet I took with me was Emily Dickinson. The only book of poetry.

DH: Is that right?

GS: I took two things of Emily Dickinson's. I took her letters, which are incredible. And I took her poems. I keep thinking how close I am to Emily Dickinson. I can't explain it. But I read her endlessly and I adore her. Maybe that could be an example of what I talked about earlier, someone who you think is your influence but is not. Or maybe she's an influence in a different way. Maybe the choice of her language, and attention to words. Words almost like physical objects. Full of resonance. Full of weight. Full of their own minds, wanting to say: "I'm not going to go there, I'm going to go there." At any rate I feel very close to her spirit. I regret that the several times I was at Amherst I wasn't able to go into her house. And I think it's fascinating that of the two houses, Whitman's house, and Emily Dickinson's house, Whitman's house, in Camden, New Jersey, is eminently available, at least when I was there. I was able to walk upstairs. I was able to lie down in Whitman's bed; I made sure my feet were not on the sheets. And the person who showed me around was a woman who lived in the back — there was a couple that lived in the back and sort of took care of that house. She was pleased that I lay down there and I read some of his poems there, and combed my beard. Nor did I have to call anybody before I arrived at Whitman's house. My god, to get into Emily Dickinson's house you had to call this one and call that one, go on Tuesday at three o'clock, and it's forbidden. It seems somehow not the right house for her poems. Have you been to that house?

DH: It's stupider than that. I lived in that town for four years. For three years I lived in a house within two blocks of her house. And I never once went into that house. I don't even think I knew where it was.

GS: That's wonderful.

DH: Now I have been back to that town and I've seen the house but I haven't been in it for the same reason, because when I've been back, it hasn't been open, and I haven't called ahead to make arrangements. But

when I was in college there, even though Wilbur put out his little Laurel edition of Dickinson then, with a fine introductory essay, Dickinson wasn't made important enough to us, that we would automatically go do that. Or I didn't have enough investment in poetry at the time to do it on my own.

But you took Dickinson to Europe.

GS: I took two books with me, in English. Her poems and her letters. I was in Lucca, reading Dickinson's poems. And I started to write an essay on her. I have it, a kind of impressionistic essay, a personal essay, a familiar essay. I had part of it done but I never finished, and I don't know where it is now. I could probably find it. I've thought about it recently because there's a friend of mine, Irene McKinney, who's putting together a book of essays on Dickinson, and I mentioned this to her and she asked me for my essay, but I'd have to sit down and finish it. I don't feel that I know enough. I never feel that I know enough to write literary essays.

DH: Well, let me ask you for a fragmentary essay on Dickinson, we'll call it the "Unfinished Essay."

GS: OK. I love that. Maybe I'll do that.

DH: What was the other book you took?

GS: Her Letters. *The Letters of Emily Dickinson*. Full of stuff. What a magic mind. What a powerful mind. What an ironic mind.

DH: What about her later neighbor, Frost?

GS: Frost I loved and Frost I love to this day. What I respond to most in Frost, is the gentleness, the tenderness. The tenderness that you see in a poem like "Birches."

DH: Or "To Earthward."

GS: Yes. It's a softness, almost like a warm robin's chest, you can almost feel the warmth, the tenderness, and . . . the love. There's such a tenderness and love in those poems. That I admire and I also admire the terrible wisdom in some of the shorter lyrics, "Design," for example. Or "To Earthward," or what's the one with the branch at the window . . .

DH: Oh yes, the "Hill Wife," where the branch frightens her.

GS: Yes. And many of these poems are early poems. That terrible knowledge. Where he got it from I don't know. From his own life, from a life of failure. You get a lot from loss and failure, you know. He was a failure as a farmer, as a schoolteacher, and as a poet, before he was a success, as a poet.

DH: He also knew the women's lament that we think of as a new discov-

ery, as in “Home Burial,” where the man just can’t understand the grief of the woman, and is unresponsive to her.

GS: I often wonder what goes on in those poems, what actually he is understanding, or how much we are reading into them. “And she learns about finalities beside the grave.” Well, I’ve never read a feminist critique on the Frost vision of the woman. I myself, and I think you’re hinting that you feel the same way, think that Frost had a deep understanding and sympathy with women and with the plight of women and he had a womanly side. A very female side. You know, I love it when someone says I have a feminine side. Forty years ago I maybe wouldn’t have liked it, I don’t know, or fifty years, or a hundred years ago. I think that Frost had a strong feminine side. I think that Pound didn’t. I think that Pound had very little understanding of the female spirit. I don’t know if the feminists have talked about that.

DH: I don’t know either.

GS: I often wondered about Pound’s fake sympathy with the underdog. Let alone his racism and his anti-Semitism, even his anti-Germanism, plus his disregard of the Arabic presence in European letters, and a number of other failings, let alone his endorsement of Confucianism, which is truly an endorsement of imperialism and order. So many of these things are not mentioned in Pound criticism. On the other hand, there he was . . .

DH: “Doing his bitter business with Jefferson and Kung.”

GS: Yes. But I don’t want to simplify Pound, who was “on the other side” in his own life and was poor and gave himself up to poverty and studied and labored and worked hard and experimented with language and did it all alone. But when you look at his relationship with H.D., his contempt for her. . . . I think she’s written some very interesting poems. I haven’t yet made up my mind about her as a poet.

DH: But he certainly neglected most of what she did.

GS: He certainly did. Now Marianne Moore, late in life. . . . I read somewhere that at the Spoleto Festival someone asked him to recite a poem and he recited a poem of Marianne Moore. I don’t totally trust that. I don’t trust that any more than his conversation with Allen Ginsberg which is reported in a *Paris Review* interview some years ago, a famous interview where Pound hugged Allen, or Allen more likely hugged Pound, and Pound, according to the report that Ginsberg gives us, asked forgiveness for that stupid, what did he call it, that “suburban prejudice”—anti-

Semitism. Ginsberg forgave him. At least he kissed him. This is an unforgivable thing for Ginsberg to do. No one has given Ginsberg the right to forgive Pound, for what he did, in his poems *and* in his broadcasts. Ginsberg does not speak for me. It is not a “suburban prejudice.” It is a Christian prejudice, and a European prejudice that goes back twenty-five hundred years, goes back actually to before the birth of Jesus, Egyptian, Roman, Alexandrian, before that, Persian and Babylonian, to a certain degree.

DH: To call it a “suburban prejudice” is to . . .

GS: It’s to trivialize the Jews. And to trivialize the prejudice, which is enormous, which is in part a hatred of Jesus, and a hatred of God. It’s a complicated thing, I don’t want to get into the whole history of anti-Semitism. But that part of Pound, there is in Pound a deep sentimentality, as well as a cunning. Pound, whom I adore in many ways, Pound has in him the American salesman. The cunning con-man that Melville writes about in *The Confidence Man*. I’m comparing him to Frost, I haven’t forgotten what we’re talking about. There’s more honesty in Frost. I never trust Pound. I never trust his views. And even the famous “Pisan Cantos,” which, when I was twenty-three years old, I read and wept over, and couldn’t believe that anyone could write anything so beautiful, I don’t trust the “Pisan Cantos.” Although I believe they are beautiful poems. It is a beautiful poem. The centaur, the part about Winston Churchill, being locked up in the cage, the self-pity; there’s part of it that’s indulgence and that is very, very literary. Frost never seemed literary to me. If *I’m* literary, I like to think that I’m literary the way Frost was literary. That the language seeped into the blood, and then you can’t help it; and that I’m not ashamed of using words that are not commonly used, or phrases, or using the mind. Frost loved the mind. Pound never lost his excessive self-consciousness to the very end. That’s a great weakness in Pound. It would be interesting to compare his very last poems to Picasso’s very last paintings. Picasso was excessive, wild, maximal—the opposite of Pound . . . Am I going too far in understanding the feminine side? Williams understood that side. Dear Williams. And embraced that side. The woman is just, wise, powerful, overwhelming in Williams. Sometimes Williams also is sentimental—in “Asphodel”—where he begs forgiveness of Flossy, for the infidelity, that’s, you know, well, he’d had a stroke so it’s forgivable. I mean asking for forgiveness. I’m not judging the infidelity. Still, we have

to judge the *poem*. You know, it's like the old Kirk Douglas movies, where he does eighteen wrong things and in the last act he's suddenly, you know, he's suddenly okay. But in a way those confessions to Flossy are not the loveliest part of Williams. But still there is crude honesty there, and all through Williams, not just in his depicting of women characters but in his attitude to the land, in his prose.

DH: *In the American Grain*.

GS: *In the American Grain*. A wonderful understanding of the female side.

But Frost I adore. His lyrics. I love his language, his words are magical, they're beautiful. Do I mind that he was not an industrial poet? No, I don't mind that he was not industrial. What does industrial mean? Why do you have to be an industrial poet? Do you have to be like Spender and write about pylons in order to be a poet?

DH: Do you like the lyrics of Williams?

GS: I prefer the longer poems. Or the developed ones. The longer his poems, the greater his music.

DH: "Desert Music" and . . .

GS: "Desert Music," and "Asphodel." I love the part—is it in "Asphodel"?—where he encounters a black man in a subway with a knobby cane, and he sees his own vision in the window and it becomes his father. I'm sometimes amazed at Williams. I love the fact that I discovered Williams independently. He's a hero of mine. His spirit is large. It is clumsy and large.

I must tell you an experience I had. I was visiting Williams's town. It's not Paterson, it's the next one over. I can never . . .

DH: Rutherford isn't it?

GS: Rutherford. I was with two friends. And we saw his house. I don't know who lives in that house now. I think there was still a doctor's sign outside. We went to the library, it's one of these newish libraries. All bright and sunny, lovely little pastel-colored tables . . . and no books. And there was a little office in the middle surrounded by glass. It was Williams's office, his study, transported to this library. Not all of it. A few books, his desk, a pipe and his hat, and his glasses. So we walked into the study and I tried on the hat. That's that famous straw hat, the panama, that's on the cover of his selected poems.

DH: Right.

GS: It fit me perfectly. Now I have a small head. I wear a 7½. I think

that's small; there might be some people who wear a 6½. The hat fit me as if it were made for me. It was a good straw hat. It was a panama, a good panama. I was also wearing a straw hat. It was early September, just before Williams's birthday, as a matter of fact. I put my straw hat down and put Williams's straw hat on my head. My friends looked at me, amazed. We started to walk out of the library and I said to the librarian, "Did you know Dr. Williams?" She said, "Oh yeah, he used to come in here sometimes. We never much liked his poetry." Isn't that amazing! I walked out, wearing that hat. Walked about a block. And I'm really a moral bastard, I wish I wasn't. I said to my friends, "I can't do it." Couldn't do it to Williams.

DH: Had to go back and trade.

GS: I had to sneak back! Steal my own hat back and give them Williams's hat. I couldn't do that to Williams. I didn't give a damn about the library; I couldn't do that to Williams. But to tell you the truth, I'm going east to New Jersey in a couple of weeks and I'm going to make a trip to that library and steal that hat again.

DH: Maybe some . . .

GS: I think Williams wants me to have that hat.

DH: I just hope somebody else didn't steal it first.

GS: Oh Jesus God, maybe Jack Gilbert stole the hat!

DH: No, I mean somebody before you the first time, so it wasn't Williams's hat to begin with . . .

GS: Oh, I see. I thought you meant that maybe Jack Gilbert or William Merwin came in, or Galway . . . Galway wouldn't do that. We should wonder which contemporary poets would steal it. That's a very important issue. Let's see. Would Gary Snyder? Gary Snyder's head is very small — but he wears a large hat.

DH: I don't think Robert Bly would.

GS: Bly has a very large head. A lovely head. James Wright wouldn't do it. Of course, he can't now, dear soul.

DH: Gilbert?

GS: Gilbert has taken to wearing hats lately. Gilbert's kind of proper. He would steal food but he wouldn't steal a hat.

DH: Maybe he thinks Williams ought to steal his hat.

GS: Ha Ha! Wonderful. Oh, he does indeed. Oh, that's beautiful. Well, I may be the only poet around . . . now you know Justice more than I,

would Justice steal that hat?

DH: He'd play some kind of a game. He'd have some kind of a bet going. If certain things broke right, very much against the odds, he might then take the hat.

GS: Well it's a fascinating subject.

DH: Do you have a favorite among your books?

GS: Of my own? I'm coming back to *Lucky Life*, more and more. I've been reading it recently because of an essay I've been writing. I don't have a copy of it. I don't own a copy of *Lucky Life*. But a student of mine had one that he got out of the library and I xeroxed it and it's as if somebody else had been writing the poems. I'm fascinated by that voice, although clearly it's not that different. It may be that the place, the location, the subject matter, the station in my life, the age make me different. Not in regard to nostalgia, or regret, or mourning. But there's a certain joy. I hope this doesn't sound arrogant, but I have great pleasure that I was able to write poems that I'm still very, very pleased with, happy with, amazed at. How the hell did I do it? I don't know how I wrote all those poems. Because I'd led an extremely busy life. I'd been a father, and a mother. I was a labor organizer, a union president. I wrote contracts. I taught at a community college, fifteen hours a week. At the same time I worked for the Pennsylvania Art Council and ran their poetry-in-the-schools program. Hired fifty-five poets, trained them, evaluated them, even fired one once. I traveled thirty miles back and forth from New Jersey to Pennsylvania every day to teach . . . and all of this time I was writing. I've never complained; well, I complained to my poor wife, and my poor children, and my poor cat. Of course I complained to the locust trees and to the river. But I didn't really complain. Nor did I accept it as fate. It was called life. You struggled in life. And now I'm amazed, because I have a much easier load in life now, that I was able to do all that work then.

DH: In reading through your poems in the last few weeks, some of them for the first time, some of them not, I was trying to decide if there was a favorite book.

GS: What did you . . .

DH: I like *Lovesick*. But there's some poems also in *The Red Coal* that I can't forget. The poem about the squirrel as the mind, I think, is unforgettable.

GS: A lot of people like that poem. A lot of high-school students, for ex-

ample, and I'm surprised because I see it as a very difficult poem. I'm surprised that they respond to it. Maybe it's the animal, or the strangeness of it, comparing the mind to a piece of paper, maybe they like comparing the mind to a piece of paper.

DH: Squirrels pop up now and then. You have the later one in *Lovesick* where the squirrel's walking up the steps after the man . . .

GS: . . . and looking at his prints.

DH: . . . at his prints in the snow.

GS: That was a strange poem. I wrote that on a Sunday morning. I remember walking over to the Eagle to buy some oranges and milk. It was snowing.

DH: And then the title poem of *The Red Coal*. The idea of that red coal that, well the red coal is a metaphor for . . .

GS: Yeah. I've read several interpretations of what the red coal stands for. It's the spirit of poetry. It's creativity. Also, in a literal way, it's the red coal itself. I suppose, when I wrote it, I had none of these things specifically in mind. It's racial and literary memory. It appears in Shelley's "Defense of Poetry" and in Isaiah . . .

DH: You mean that image?

GS: Yes, an angel, one of the seraphim, laid a live coal on Isaiah's mouth and purged his sin. And it appears in the Mishnah. Moses, the legend goes, is a baby in the Pharaoh's court. He is given a choice—it is a test—between a crown of jewels, the Pharaoh's crown, and a hot coal. An angel intervenes—or God himself, I can't remember which—and directs him to choose the coal. Otherwise it would be construed that he wanted to sieze the Pharaoh's crown, as, apparently, his magicians—his priests—had warned him. It has psychological and anthropological overtones that Freud touched on. Moses puts his burned hand into his mouth and burns his tongue. Thus his tonguetiedness. Thus Aaron. For years I lived with a furnace with red coals. We burned bituminous coal, not anthracite coal, in western Pennsylvania. And I have vivid memories of furnaces. All through my youth, and later when I lived in Indiana, Pennsylvania.

DH: Shoveling out cinders, from the coal.

GS: Shoveling out coal, the cinders, the whole notion of it. I had a fireplace in Raubsville, on the river, and there were red coals there. It's the creative urge. It's the mystery, it's the magic that passes on. That poem starts with two photographs, as you know, the photograph of Pound and

Williams at St. Elizabeth's. Pound sitting down and Williams standing behind him. He'd already had his first stroke, his eyes are . . .

DH: "Forty thousand wrinkles between them," you say.

GS: And Jack and I walking down the Boulevard St. Michel, when we were in our early to mid-twenties, dressed in khakis and old sweaters. Everybody around us dressed, as they did, in the early fifties, ties and shirts and briefcases and girdles and umbrellas. And that's what the poem is about. The two photographs. I resisted using that as a title for the book. I wanted to call it by another title, another poem about returning to Pennsylvania from New York and passing a building called the Rose Warehouse. I wanted to call that book *The Rose Warehouse* and I went out in my diligent way and took some photographs of that beautiful building that looks right over the Lincoln Tunnel where I used to leave New York on Sunday morning, and drive back to Pennsylvania. I'd always see the Rose Warehouse which was once a meat processing plant. On the top two stories are projections, projected figures, I think in stone, not cement, of lambs and cows that were being killed—processed—inside. But now the building, or then the building, was empty and the name "Rose Warehouse" was still on it. I don't know what was stored there. Outside young prostitutes walked around, and I think they went into the tunnel with truck drivers and did their bitter business and then came back to their stations. It's a poem of mourning. It's a poem about the end of a love affair, a poem about grief, it's about . . .

DH: . . . burial, it's about the holocaust in . . .

GS: . . . about the holocaust, about burial . . .

DH: "Kissing the shovel goodbye . . ."

GS: "Kissing the small shovel . . ." My editor at the time, Jonathan Gassisi, kept looking at the photo of Jack and me and insisted we use it. And he was right. But I didn't want, I didn't want to put Jack . . .

DH: On the cover of your book?

GS: But, you know, it was funny. Gilbert was on his way to Greece and he took that book with him. Three weeks or three months later, I got a long letter from Jack, about *our* book! He was eager to discuss the photograph. Never mentioned the poems; it was wonderful.

DH: Well, I take it part of the idea was to compare where you appear to be there in the photograph, with the age of where you are when you approach Pound and Williams.

GS: You see, in each of these poems, as in the “Picasso Poem,” there are impossible interpenetrations of time structures. That is, I’m comparing Jack and me as we were, say, in the mid-fifties to the way they were in the twenties.

DH: Right.

GS: And I’m comparing the way we were in our mid-twenties to the way they were in their late sixties, as I was comparing us in our early fifties and them in their late sixties, and so on and so on. And they all became fused, too.

DH: And as you imagine where you will be when you reach . . .

GS: . . . and as we imagine where we will be when I . . . although it will be Jack who goes to St. Elizabeth, not me. And I will come to visit him and bring him food and a saw, to cut his way out.

DH: Are you the same age?

GS: Exactly the same age. He was born one day before me.

DH: Is that right?

GS: Yeah. February 21st and 22nd. And I think that Richard Hazley was born on February 23rd.

DH: My daughter’s birthday.

GS: All three of us within two or three days of each other. Although Hazley is two years younger.

DH: What’s happened to him. Does he still write?

GS: Dick teaches in Indiana, Pennsylvania, where I taught. Indiana University of Pennsylvania. . . . We taught together, lived near each other. Of the three of us, Dick had the greatest gift. He was a lyric poet *par excellence*. He memorized dozens of poems. He probably knows a third of Stevens by heart, a fourth of Shakespeare. He’s amazing . . . he was a great actor.

DH: He must be a great teacher.

GS: He’s a fantastic teacher. A great teacher. He’s a hypnotist too. Professional hypnotist, one of the best known in the country. Does it for entertainment and for money and out of boredom, I would guess. He has been writing poems. He had a small volume published by a press in Pittsburgh. There’s a part of Dick that resisted what was going on in American poetry. I sometimes think that in another period, maybe twenty years earlier, twenty years later, a century earlier, or later, he would have been an important poet. For whatever reason, he has made a decision not to be a

poet in the same way that Jack and I made our decision to be poets. And I love Dick. But there's a part of him that's extremely cynical about the enterprise of poetry. He's said to me on occasion, "Well, how's the poetry business?" He's probably right—but that's not the whole thing. He's a great lover of poetry, but he's become somewhat conservative. I don't mean politically conservative but . . .

DH: Aesthetically conservative?

GS: Aesthetically. But he's there, he's very much alive, very healthy. And I think he's still writing. I haven't seen him in a couple of years. I keep meaning to visit him. He lives on a beautiful farm. He knows more about the natural world than anybody I've ever met. Ever. Flowers, trees, animals; he's at home with animals. I mean animals respond: deer, snake, as if he's one of them. I've never seen such an amazing thing.

DH: So he confronts himself elsewhere than in poetry.

GS: I guess really that's true. I have great regrets about it. I wish he'd been able to put those things together. I think he would have been a great poet. Maybe he still will be. He's turned more to Stevens—against Williams and for Stevens, if you could make that crazy distinction. I heard Ginsberg make it one day at a gathering at the Williams house in . . .

DH: Rutherford, right?

GS: Why can I not remember the name "Rutherford"? There was a group reading in celebration of Williams's hundredth birthday in September. '82, '3 . . .

DH: Right, '83.

GS: Ginsberg was there and about eighteen other poets. And he kept saying to the person in charge—it was Mark Hillringhouse and he was sweating profusely—Ginsberg kept saying, "Why is he here?" pointing, as I recall, to Dan Halpern, who headed the program at Columbia. He kept saying, "At Columbia they teach Stevens and not Williams." I swear to god those were his words. It sounds almost stupid. I love Ginsberg, but I was amazed. So this poor guy—Hillringhouse—appealed to me and I said, "Well I used to teach at Columbia, and I taught both Williams *and* Stevens."

DH: You were mentioning all the poets you were reading when you were a young man. Who are your students reading now?

GS: I love that question. When I was twenty-three, twenty-two, I was reading Hart Crane, and early Ezra Pound, maybe some of *The Cantos*,

Eliot and Jeffers and D. H. Lawrence. Cummings and MacLeish, Yeats, Hopkins and Auden and Dylan Thomas. And let's see, of that group, I guess some of my students read Eliot and I think a few of them read Pound. Some are reading Auden because they're trying to find how to return to form. The enterprise is different now. There are no acknowledged masters, or central heroes. Of course, Levine and Kinnell and I are now elders. And Ginsberg and Ashbery and Rich and Merwin and Creeley, and Levertov and Merrill. It's amazingly different. They like Berryman and Bishop. They like Roethke when I bring him to their attention. They don't seem to like Lowell. I think Gluck is popular, and Linda Gregg and C. K. Williams. They do read Yeats and, of course, James Wright. They're reading some Polish and Hungarian poets, and some of the French and Spanish poets.

DH: Here we are about to turn to the final decade of the century. I'm sure we'll be full of speculation about what's carried forward into the next century. Do you have any hints or notions or wishes on that score?

GS: I wish Americans would stop doing everything alike. I hate the fake variety we've got. That we have a car that's made by, say, Chrysler Motors, and they pretend they have twenty-seven varieties. Tempo, Fiesta, Panther, Fruit Tree, Dirty Socks . . . I don't know what they call those cars by. There used to be, Fords, Chevies, and Plymouths.

DH: And they were different.

GS: They were a little different from each other. So there's fake variety and it goes along with our deceit and our self-deceit and our labor over meaningless things, and our abstractions.

What would I wish? I wish we would not forget nature. I wish we would not forget animals. I wish we would not forget the poor. In the Thirties, Roosevelt said that "One third of our nation is poor." It's still the same. In different ways, maybe, than then. I'm talking about the old, the sick, the helpless, the frightened . . .

DH: . . . more and more people are alone, women and children are alone.

GS: The lonely. I wish our poets would not forget them. The real ones can't. What this means poetically, I don't know. I'm not going to prescribe the kind of poems people should be writing. But I would want our poets to remain, let me just put it this way, I would want our poets to remain in touch. I would want them to be political. I would want them to be constantly Antaeus-like. To be in touch with nature. And to remem-

ber. To outwit the future by remembering. And that's all I'm going to ask. Where they're going to live, what forms their lives are going to take, what they're going to do about birth control, about alcoholism, about drugs, presidents, jobs, the work-week, the play-week, I don't know those things. I just don't want them to forget . . . Is this conservative? You bet it is. This blue earth of ours is an incredible place, it's an incredible planet. We are so fucking lucky. I mean, we breath this air. You know, we have this rain. Look at the last couple of days, how gorgeous they've been. Look at these trees. I mean, does this sound . . . does this sound corny? Let it be corny.

DH: Well, after the summer we've had.

GS: I want us to all kiss the ground, endlessly, endlessly . . . My dear friend William Merwin is planting in his garden in Hawaii, in Maui, every species of tree he can get hold of that will grow there, so as to preserve them. I think maybe William has a pessimistic view of the future. And maybe it's politically absurd to think that he'll retain the past, in the face of a general onslaught, but the way a poet operates is: if he does it in his own mind, it's done, if Merwin does it in his little garden, then it's done in time, in history, in space; and it exists. And those species exist. It's not a question of quantity. That's what he's doing. Maybe he can't even defend it philosophically, maybe it's indefensible, but it's beautiful what he's doing. I want us all to do that in some way. I wish I would do more of it. I want us all to have gardens. How about just that simple.

DH: That's what Auden prescribed for a poet—among other things . . . to tend a garden.

GS: I remember that. "Know the names of flowers." I'm deeply indebted to Pat Stern on this score. I've always loved the woods. I grew up in Pittsburgh, which is a city of hills. Everyone in Pittsburgh has access to ravines and mountains and hills and neglected pockets. This has entered my poetry. I lived across from black locusts when I was a boy. I've always been in touch with nature, always loved it. But my natural objects are poverty objects. Black locusts. Weeds. Sparrows and swallows . . .

DH: Female robins, female cardinals . . .

GS: My uncle was a farmer, had wonderful cabbages. And apples, but we didn't grow up with that, and my interest and my proclivity wasn't that way, except I loved to be in the woods and I can't stand being away from them. But Pat was fascinated in a different way and had a different kind of

knowledge, and studied flowers and vegetables and planted them. We planted trees together, and I learned a lot about gardens from her, a lot about the process of growth and decay and change. I'm very, very grateful for what she's taught me. She's a critical factor in any understanding I have of gardens. She grew up in Johnstown, Pennsylvania, which is about ninety miles from Pittsburgh, seventy miles from Pittsburgh, I guess . . .

DH: A small town?

GS: A small town, site of the Johnstown Flood, in the 1890s, I don't remember when it was, 1888, maybe. It was once a thriving city, it's had so many floods, and so much bad luck. Bethlehem Steel has moved out, and, you know, thrown the city to the dogs. It's probably a half of its former population. But it's a beautiful city with great hills. Incline, cars that go up and down the sides of mountains. When she grew up there she had certain advantages—maybe disadvantages, had dance lessons and piano lessons. I think she took dance lessons from Gene Kelly.

DH: Really?

GS: Gene Kelly. The Gene Kelly Dance studio. And she studied the piano and drums. She went to Carnegie-Mellon—it was called Carnegie Tech then. Both bastards hadn't taken over yet. She studied art and she was in the same class as Philip Pearlstein and Andy Warhol . . . I drove Andy in my father's 1949 Ford to the train station in East Liberty, PA, the first stop from downtown Pittsburgh, when he went off to New York to make his fortune.

DH: You already knew him through Pat?

GS: Well, I'd known him for a couple of years while he was at Carnegie Tech. We used to go on picnics together. I have a lot of pictures of Andy when he was eighteen. He was the youngest in that class. He was the *wunderkind*. Most of the people in that class were veterans.

DH: You could sell those pictures for a year's . . .

GS: You want to hear something more horrible and wonderful. When I left Andy and we said goodbye, he gave me a painting. He said, "Maybe you want this little painting, I don't have room for it." It was just a painting of an old woman with a wen on her nose. I took it to my mother's, well I took it home, and put it into a closet, and my father and mother years later moved to Miami and I guess they took it with them. Years and years later I remembered the painting and I said to my mother, "Do you have that painting of Andy Warhol's?" My heart was beating. She said,

“Andy Warhol? You mean that little Polish boy with the pimples on his face?” I said, “First of all, he’s not Polish. Secondly,” I said, “the pimples are gone. Thirdly, he’s a millionaire.” I figured that would be the way to get to her. So we hunted for that painting. We found a painting of my cousin, Shimmy Grossman, who now owns a perfume store in Paris, and whose career as a painter ended when he was seventeen. We had his painting but we couldn’t find Andy’s . . . God knows what it may have been worth. It may have been the only living example of an early Andy Warhol. Do you realize I had that?

DH: You could set up a museum on the basis of that.

GS: I would create a museum, I would buy a little house, and I would have one painting in that whole house, okay? On the second floor. I’d have the walls perfectly clean, stairway polished; then I would have a catalogue. And in the catalogue it would just be the one painting, very spare, like Andy was, a little biography, maybe a little picture of Andy. Then I would have a person working there, downstairs, whose main job was to collect tickets and to, you know, count the number of people coming in. And that would be all. I would charge \$12.50. Now, you know you’d pay \$12.50.

DH: And you would call it the Andy Warhola museum.

GS: I would call it the Andy Warhola museum and it would be in Pittsburgh.

DH: And you would have a straw hat there and you would see . . .

GS: Oh my god I’ve got to get that straw hat of Williams’s. Ashbery has it!

DH: What is obsessing you now? Besides the hat.

GS: I’m desperate now to know more languages, and it’s too late. There’s no sense in kidding myself anymore. There was a time when I used to travel on the subway in New York City and read medieval Latin. I was sure that I was going to know fifteen languages. I wanted to outdo Pound. There’s no sense kidding myself. But what I’m doing now, I’m learning Yiddish. Yiddish was the language spoken in my house when I was a boy, between my grandmother and my parents. That was their first language, I think, rather than English, or just as much as English—not my mother and father among themselves but with my grandmother. So by listening to them I learned Yiddish. And I can understand Yiddish. I speak it haltingly. I speak it, out comes German. And of course Yiddish is

German. Yiddish is the German spoken in the eleventh century in the Rhine Valley, that's the original structure . . . It would be like Old English, superimposed with certain Hebrew and Slavic words, and cognate elements from the country you lived in, France or America. So it's a kind of German, but it uses the Hebrew ideogram and it works from right to left. I've decided to re-learn Yiddish and to finally learn it as a literary language, for it was—it is—a complete literary language. It was, as you probably know, the language of women and children, the language of the house. It was a despised language for various reasons. It was despised by the Jews, partly because the gentiles despised it, typical self-hatred. It was partly despised because it was wrongly considered to be a bastardization of German instead of a separate language. And since the German Jews hated it, and they were the rich and powerful Jews, the other Jews learned to hate it. The ideal of Yiddish, in terms of Platonic form, was thought to be German. But that's not true. Yiddish has its own color, its own style, its own soul. It is truly a separate language from German. It certainly has its own flavor and its own humor, I shouldn't have to point this out. It was a language Jews from all over the world could speak to each other in. But unfortunately, several things happened. It came to a great flowering at the same time as modern Hebrew. So the two languages were in competition with each other. Though many people knew them both, sometimes a choice had to be made. And the choice was very complicated. . . . I mean, it involved political issues. Do you move to the left or to the right? It involved choices concerning Zionism and Israel. Do you go to Israel and speak Hebrew or do you go to America and speak Yiddish, and finally English? . . . Or France, and French? Or Argentina, and Spanish? It involved complicated relationships with the language of the country you lived in. Should you not learn Polish instead of Yiddish? What were the choices available for Isaac Singer when he was twenty-five years old, in Warsaw? Do you speak Yiddish? Do you write in Yiddish? In Hebrew? I'm sure he knows Hebrew. Do you write in Polish?

DH: He probably knew them all.

GS: And later, English. He chose Yiddish, for many reasons. Yiddish is a complete language. It's a full language. It's been bad mouthed, and of course it's been bad mouthed extensively in the first thirty years of the Israeli—first forty years of the Israeli commonwealth. And you know there are Jews in Israel who spoke Yiddish who have pretended they didn't be-

cause Hebrew was the preferred language. It's true that there is now a sentimental return to Yiddish. People say that it's dying out because of the death of the six million and because of the successful assimilation of Jews in America who speak only English. Mostly. There's a dying out of Yiddish in South America and Canada and France and certainly in the Russian cities, Leningrad and Moscow and Kiev. For a century people have been talking about the death of Yiddish. Maybe Yiddish will die. It's spoken by a respectable number of people. Maybe there are more Kurds, I think there are twenty million Kurdish speakers in the world. But a lot fewer speak Gaelic. There's a language in northern Yugoslavia called Slovenian. I think fewer people speak Slovenian than Yiddish. Maybe there's a million people in the world who speak Yiddish, who speak it in one way or another. Maybe in forty years there will be five million, or five thousand. I couldn't care less. Yiddish is the language of my past.

DH: It's not so unlike Merwin planting those trees.

GS: Very, very good. Exactly. That's me, planting my trees. And I'm going to learn Yiddish. I put a notice up on the bulletin board here in the Workshop. My friend Danny Weissbort is my partner in this. We've got seven or eight students, we're going to have a Yiddish study group. And we're really going to nail it down and I'm going to translate some Yiddish poetry, not in the sense that other people translate it . . . somebody else doing it crudely into English first. I mean I am going to *translate* it. I want to find out where I come from, man. Is there anything wrong with that? I'm anxious to get down there and sputter some Yiddish. I want to sing some Yiddish songs. I mean, I just met a woman recently who excites me because she speaks Yiddish. She reads and writes and speaks Yiddish. She's beautiful.

DH: And maybe we've gone forth just about as far as we can for now.

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With thanks to Gregor Macdonald for transcribing and helping edit this interview.