

*George Hitchcock: Larger than Life*  
*Portrait of a Poetry/Spiritual Mentor*  
by Robert McDowell

Before I knew him, before I learned that everything about George loomed large, I saw that physically he was *big*. George Hitchcock, poet-in-residence at what was then College V, the arts cluster college at the University of California, Santa Cruz, was crossing the college quad the night I worked up the courage to meet him.

At 6'4", George wore dark woolen slacks, ecologically sound, furry shoes, cotton shirt and embroidered vest, corduroy jacket, a paisley ascot, loosely knotted, and a black hat with a discreet red feather in its band. His salt and pepper hair, though not horsetail garish, was long even by 1971 faculty standards. His head was huge, but not out of whack or inappropriate to his size, and he casually puffed on a briar stuffed with Revelation pipe tobacco.

Of course I already knew who he was, our resident poet and the editor/publisher of *kayak* magazine and books. George's presence on the faculty was the main reason I'd picked UCSC for undergraduate school. In the quad that night, I had been in residence for almost a quarter, yet had not met the man I hoped to work with. To that point in my life, it felt like my biggest challenge. I needed to seize the moment, meet the maestro. If I ever hoped to take his series of writing courses, I would need his consent.

Flustered, I fell into step beside him and introduced myself. He barely broke stride or glanced at me as he heard me out, but there was something in his glance that made me feel *seen*. That was it, a quality I would see and feel in George so many times in the years ahead. Compared to others, so little got by him. The man was sharp, and had about him the air of mystery one associates with seers and magicians. Fog like witches' hair drifted around us. He told me to drop some poems in his box. If they showed promise, I'd hear from him.

The next day, after casing out the joint and making sure he wasn't in his office, I dropped a packet of half a dozen poems in the box outside his door. A few days later I found a simple typewritten note in my mailbox. It said *The poems show a little promise. You are welcome to enroll in the next workshop I offer.* From that first workshop on, I worked with George through several classes and independent projects until my graduation in 1974.

George could be, and often was, an intimidating, inspiring teacher. Much to the surprise of a student who was used to attending classes in the sterile atmosphere of 70s conventional classrooms, George's workshops often met at his home, first in the Bonny Doon woods, then in the Victorian showcase he later owned with his partner, the poet Marjorie Simon. It was not unusual for other faculty writers like Raymond Carver, David Swanger, Lynn Sukenick, and Brother Antoninus to drop in. Guest authors such as Jack Gilbert, Carolyn Kizer, Bert Meyers, Philip Levine, W. S. Merwin, Charles Simic, Robert Bly, also occasionally attended, and their impromptu visits and contributions contributed to the theatrical quality of the evening.

Now that we are three decades into the poetry workshop culture, it might be difficult to imagine what made Hitchcock's workshops stand out, but in fact they were original and dramatic in every way. Overhead lighting was not favored. Participants sat on plush couches, chairs, and pillows. George or some previously appointed student would begin by talking about some aspect of writing, or specific authors. Guest authors would talk about their life, their work, their process. Later, George would bring out *The Object* (a Tahitian sailing vessel, a frightening Mexican mask). At first many self-consciously resisted. We were used to opening books, being told what to write on, listening for buzzers or bells. Some smiled, swallowing a chuckle (to make a derisive sound aloud was to invite certain death). Yet somehow in the quiet of the room, inside the nimbus of the atmospheric lighting, the spirit of invention (aided, I'm convinced, by George's calm, his theatrical bearing) came over us. The object passed around the room. For twenty minutes or so, we invited it into us. Then we wrote what came.

A break followed, a break consisting of wine and beer, meats and breads and cheeses, conversation the Irish call "good crac," flirtations and inspired arguments. When we reconvened on George's signal, it was worksheet time.

That was always a moment of high excitement. The two or three featured writers read aloud, the rest offered critiques. Eventually, George weighed in, provoking despair, elation, or anger (never indifference). He might growl during his comments, but one could count on no b.s. In all things George was honest.

One night a student on the worksheet brought her guitar. When her turn came, she strummed and sang her poem-songs. Initial feedback was uncomfortable, stilted, kind.

"Why is it," George said, "that when middle and upper-middle class white people sing folk songs, they make themselves sound like illiterate hillbillies?"

The mortified student became microscopic. Shocked and indignant, we rallied to her defense. Not that most of us didn't agree with George. We did. But we were following a workshop code, coming to the defense of a peer because we feared and knew that our time was coming, and coming all too soon. Much later, I realized that George deliberately turned a class into a hornet's nest to force people to articulate arguments and positions in extreme duress. He also did it to build the community among us. He did it, too, of course, to make a point, as in *Write and speak in your own voice!*

I remember vividly one worksheet on which I appeared. I read five poems. I thought highly of them. The comments of my peers suggested, for the most part, that they thought highly of them, too. Oh, I swelled with success. Then George spoke.

"Robert," he said "I could take the best line or two from each of these and use them to make a better poem than anything you read tonight."

I stared at George, wondering if he had suddenly gone mad. I struggled to contain my anger, which flagged as I acknowledged a stronger interior voice. It said *Yes, he's right*. I have never forgotten the lesson. In one sentence, George schooled me in life and writing. In moments like that one, he opened our eyes to the demands of serious literature, to the rigor required of the writer who must develop and trust that merciless inner critic. He taught us to beware the quicksilver dangers of unbridled ego and unearned claps on the back.

It wasn't always a fright show. George could be and often was encouraging. We lived for his pronouncement that something we had written was "eminently publishable."

Once he was convinced of our seriousness, he gave much more of himself in one-on-ones, encouraging a student writer, for instance, to read recommended philosophy and nature texts, attend the opera, ballet, theatre, get a summer job doing some interesting manual labor. I remember him once taking two of us up to San Francisco to participate in a reading and get-together that included Jack Gilbert, Kathleen Fraser, Laurence Ferlinghetti, and a very angry Eugene Ruggles, among others. Ruggles demanded that George explain why James Tate was getting so much more attention than he (Ruggles) was receiving. With remarkable kindness, even tenderness, George answered that not everyone was going to be famous, and that's just the way it would always be. But fame or the lack of it had nothing to do with whether or not you wrote good poems, or lived a satisfying life. This was heady stuff for a nineteen year old to walk into. If I had to name one word that would capture the message George as teacher had for all of us, it would probably be *Grow*.

Our George Hitchcock obscured, early on, the many other essential Hitchcocks we would eventually discover and admire. It was a natural segue to link our sharply intelligent, tough loving, and nurturing leader of writing classes with the publisher and editor of the liveliest quarterly poetry magazines in the country. We soon learned about the professional actor and playwright, whose plays have been produced more than thirty times world-wide. In a recent review in *Booklist*, Ray Olson commented, "...indeed, that the plays aren't regularly staged is inexplicable..."

George's social activism was always center stage, but one had to get to know him much better before hearing stories about him crisscrossing California in the forties to organize dairy unions, or his experience as a journalist for the *Western Worker*, then as Sports Editor for the *People's Daily World* where he wrote his column under the by-line, *Lefty* (and hired Kenneth Rexroth to write an outdoor column). We knew he had testified before the House Un-American Activities Committee in San Francisco in 1957, and that his testimony had been nationally broadcast. Courtesy of the *Congressional Record*, here is an excerpt from Hitchcock's testimony.

Mr. Tavenner: What is your occupation or profession?

Mr. Hitchcock: My occupation is a gardener.

Mr. Tavenner: What is your profession?

Mr. Hitchcock: My profession is a gardener. I do underground work on plants.

The transcript of the entire event retains its timeliness, especially today. Its lessons are still clear: That bravery and wit are more than a match for those who would entrap us and severely limit our human rights.

In addition to all of these compelling figures, there was the writer of fiction. In the thirties, George wrote several novels. Because he considered them not good enough, he burned them all. Later he produced two keepers, *The Racquet* and *Another Shore*, and two volumes of short stories. One of these, *Invitation to the Hunt*, was made into a French film of the same title and directed by Claude Chabrol. To this day, my personal favorite remains *Another Shore*. It is one of the most beautiful, delightful, and oddly uplifting novels I have ever read. I find that I have to pick it up every couple of years because it helps me to right my own drifting spiritual course. If *Another Shore* isn't a cult classic, it should be.

In all personas and in all endeavors, George Hitchcock is a superb artist, first and

last. We must add to this assessment the fact that he was also one of our most influential and perceptive editors and publishers. *Kayak* magazine was launched in 1964 in San Francisco. Each issue began with this manifesto: *A kayak is not a galleon, ark, coracle or speedboat. It is a small watertight vessel operated by a single oarsman. It is submersible, has sharply pointed ends, and is constructed from light poles and the skins of furry animals. It has never yet been successfully employed as a means of mass transport.*

The magazine moved with George to Santa in 1968, and continued to appear through its 64<sup>th</sup> issue published in 1984. Through two decades, poets, collagists, and essayists vied to be published there. George's editorial sensibility favored political, Surrealist and Imagist poems, but he was always capable of publishing poems that fit none of these categories. Poets as diverse and valuable as Sharon Olds, Anne Sexton, Michael McClure, Robert Bly, Margaret Atwood, Nancy Willard, John Haines, W. S. Merwin, Philip Levine, Frederick Morgan, Carolyn Kizer, Raymond Carver, Charles Simic, Bill Knott and many others regularly appeared. Issues included lively *Correspondence Columns* where the arguments of the day raged like so many impetuously set brush fires, articles and reviews attacking pompous literary celebrities of the moment, and, of course, the most entertaining, unforgettable rejection slips ever unleashed on hopeful writers. *kayak* rejection slips ended up decorating bathroom walls, foyers, kitchens, writing studios. They were laid out on tables at therapy sessions. They provoked grim, hysterical laughter, threats, and tears. Today, nineteen years after the appearance of *kayak's* last issue, writers who now feel fortunate to have received them in the past share laughs and stories about them. "Did you ever get the one where the guy has just been pushed down a hole? What about the one in which the man is pursued by a pack of rabid dogs?"

At some point, George also began issuing books. He did so when the spirit or a particular book moved him. Again, his taste stood out. He published second books by Philip Levine and Raymond Carver, early volumes by James Tate, Kathleen Fraser, Robin Magowan, Nancy Willard, Hayden Carruth, Jay Wright, Morton Marcus, and the first two books by Charles Simic. He published translations by W. S. Merwin and prose poems and fables by the legendary Edouard Roditi. These volumes were lovely to look at. Most were illustrated with prints or wood-cuts. All are collectors' items today, if one can find them.

The magazine and press successfully created and sustained a national, even international community. At its peak, thanks to the management of Marjorie Simon, the magazine's subscription base exceeded 7,000 libraries, individuals, and universities. It is hard to imagine a small, quarterly poetry magazine today commanding the attention that *kayak* commanded throughout its twenty year run. Everybody wanted to be in it. It was essential for anyone who was serious about reading and writing poetry. Perhaps most important, *Kayak* was fun. Against a clubby, lockstep mentality, George's *kayak* celebrated independence. Reading *kayak* was like romping through a field, engaging in effervescent conversation and play. Its wit and high spirits were infectious. Each issue provided a reading experience one dreams of but rarely finds. Its followers devoured it, reading it over and over, debating its contents in classes, discussing it with friends. A brief description of the way that *kayak* was physically put together may give a very good sense of the spirit that made it all so special.

Students, friends, and writers convened for collating parties at George's house.

Directed by George, they put together, stapled, and trimmed the magazine, addressed and stuffed envelopes, affixed postage and updated subscription cards, and replenished themselves at huge tables of wine, breads, salads, pastries, cold cuts, soda and beer. The day hummed with work and spirited gab. People talked politics, poetry and writing, baseball and tennis. They talked about love and travel, music and theatre. They swapped jokes, shared the scoop on jobs and court cases, told stories about kids and pets, and debated the growing of healthy roses and fruit trees. The poet Morton Marcus said once that the *kayak* collating parties were the closest he ever came to experiencing the atmosphere of a European salon. Over the last thirty years, I've attended thousands of literary gatherings, but I've never experienced anything quite like those perfect days in Santa Cruz, California when the collating parties stretched from early morning to early evening. At the end, there was the new issue of the magazine we could not wait to take home and read.

George Hitchcock was, of course, the central figure, the director who guided our play. In retrospect, I see that his multi-faceted personality made George a compelling teacher. He ignited us. He freed us to dream big dreams. He encouraged us and taught us to work hard. And he also always reminded us never to take ourselves too seriously.

In a recent letter to *Poet & Writers*, the poet Alik Barnstone concludes her reminiscence of many nights of warmth and support at the Hitchcock/Simon home with these words: "George shows us through the example of his life that American poetry extends into the social and political, a gift that, at this painful moment in our history, I cherish most deeply."

That he was able to give similar support to emerging and established professionals is perhaps even more remarkable.

Raymond Carver, who taught the first writing workshop I ever attended, loved George as a friend, poet, and editor. Ray, himself a superb, gentle teacher, marveled at George's generosity of spirit. "He saved me," Ray told me once. "When I didn't think I'd write or publish another thing, George befriended and encouraged me, and published my second book."

Philip Levine read at UCSC in 1973, and in introductory remarks he told a similar story. Following publication of his first book, *Not This Pig*, he had no success finding a publisher for his second volume. George stepped up and published the beautiful *Red Dust*, the volume preceding *They Feed They Lion* (the title poem of which originally appeared in the pages of *kayak*).

The dual achievement of *kayak* magazine and press would be enough to set one's permanent place of importance in our literary pantheon. But Hitchcock's legacy includes his achievement as a poet.

George's poems, it seems, have always been undervalued. It's easy to see why. In America we tend to tag people as soon as we can. Generally, we like others to be one thing (housepainter, yes, but not housepainter and gardener). We rush to make sense of someone, then lapse into a comfortable social stasis. For our own sakes, for our own sense of security, we like our defined people to stay put.

In his intimate introduction to *One-Man Boat : The George Hitchcock Reader* (edited by Joseph Bednarik, Mark Jarman, and myself, and published earlier this year by Story Line Press), Philip Levine makes a generous confession. "For many years," he

writes, "I did not take George's poetry as seriously as it merited. I think I may have been so enraptured by his presence that I assumed that was the entrée of the feast he is. In 1984 he sent me a copy of a large collection, *The Wounded Alphabet*, which contains several extraordinary poems in his distinctive voice, poems as extraordinary as anything being written. Here is one..."

*End of Ambition*

when I get there the last  
mail has been sorted  
my friends gather  
in their arctic parkas  
they speak a language  
I don't understand  
they've put off their  
togas I don't recognize  
the pumping station  
or the grimy collier  
docked at the pier

I'd waited a long time  
I sat in the tower  
for months weaving  
these wings out of rage  
& envy I'd almost  
forgotten the song  
of the parapet &  
the green vision  
we saw from the cliffs

perhaps it's too late  
perhaps they no longer  
care the tide is out  
the rules of flight  
have been altered and  
maybe there's no way now  
to get beyond the clouds  
of white corpuscles  
and the tongues  
darting & skimming  
over the parched mud-flats

All of his life, George Hitchcock has successfully resisted definitions. He has said of his poems that he works at them until he almost understands what's going on. Success, to him, means stopping at that point. George's poems, almost baroque in their beauty,

incite radical political and psychological action. In their way, they form a call to arms, a call to living an uncompromising life. Mark Jarman told me once he wished he had George's imagery in his own poetry tool kit. I told him I felt the same way. Though identified with American Surrealism, George in his poetry cannot really be pinned down so easily. His poems, after all, are original. Emily Dickinson would have happily felt the top of her head coming off had she been alive to read them.

At the close of his introduction to *One-Man Boat*, Levine adds, "To understate the matter, George gave the American poetry world three priceless gifts: his own writing, *kayak*--the finest poetry magazine of my era--and his complex and unusual presence, which served as a model for so many of us: the model of the poet as a total human being (as my mother would have said, a *mensch*)."

For the last fifteen years George Hitchcock has concentrated on yet another aspect of his artistic life, that of the painter. Dividing his time each year between La Paz, Mexico and Harrisburg, Oregon, he has created hundreds of paintings whose style might be described as American Primitive meets Magritte. In one we are treated to the profile of a man's head, which is depicted as a tight, circling maze of letters, tools, train sets, random, foreign words, and math equations. In another an angular figure with an ochre complexion stares openmouthed at a two-faced reflection in a hand-held mirror. George's paintings and collages are regularly featured in Mexican and West Coast galleries. On June 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2003, George Hitchcock celebrated his 89<sup>th</sup> birthday. A film documentary on his life and work is currently in production.

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When George moved from his Bonny Doon creek side home to town in Santa Cruz in 1972, Mark Jarman and I volunteered for the task of packing up the inventory of kayak books and back issues of the magazine. Down a slippery embankment, in a small room under the house, we found ourselves alone with black widow spiders and boxes of magazines and books bearing the stamped names of Carver, Levine, Merwin, Simic, Tate. For our services, we'd been promised copies of whatever we wanted. I think I suggested we abscond with all of it, drop out of school, and open a bookshop. We thought then that we had been entrusted with the kingdom's gold. Considering the prices collectors pay for those books and magazines today, we were more accurate than we knew. All day we packed and toted, brushing aside spiders, braced by the dank forest air and the aroma of George's pipe tobacco. We talked about that smell, how it accompanied George everywhere and always comforted us.

"It smells like poetry," Mark said. "We're moving the House of Poetry."

It did. And we were.

--Robert McDowell  
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