

Introducing the SRPR Illinois Poet: Tony Trigilio



Photograph by Elizabeth Lent

Tony Trigilio lives in Chicago, Illinois. He teaches poetry and literature courses in the English Department at Columbia College Chicago, where he also serves as Acting Coordinator of the Undergraduate Poetry Program. His poems have been published in numerous journals, most recently in *The Iowa Review*, *The Beloit Poetry Journal*, *Rhino*, and *Jack Magazine*. He is a co-founder of the poetry magazine *Court Green*, and also has served on the editorial boards for the Samuel French Morse Poetry Prize (Northeastern University, Boston) and *Djinni* magazine. He is the author of the critical book on poetry and prophesy, *"Strange Prophecies Anew": Rereading Apocalypse in Blake, H.D., and Ginsberg* (Fairleigh Dickinson UP) and reviews and articles in journals such as *American Literature*, *Modern Language Studies*, and *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*. A musician as well as a writer, he toured the U.S. several years ago with the band *Drumming On Glass*. Currently, he is working on a manuscript of poems, *The Lama's English Lessons*, and a new critical book, *Spoken from the Breath: Allen Ginsberg's Spiritual Poetics*.

A Discussion with Tony Trigilio

SRPR: You seem to be playing often with mundane scenes and settings and at times a heavy emotionality—and I find this fascinating. So this may seem a simple-minded question, but what emotional effect do you expect, often, to have on a reader?

Tony: I like to take moments that seem expendable and re-imagine them as charged with meaning. This is one of the things poetry does well, for me—it engages the commonplace so closely that it's not so ordinary anymore. Or shows us new angles of vision where it seems like none were needed. Actually, I don't feel right using the word "vision." I'm thinking of Elizabeth Bishop here. For her, "visions" are "looks," and this is the sort of thing I try to achieve in my own work—to elevate the mundane "look" so that it's as vital as "vision." I'm attracted to those moments that seem mundane in their happening, but in retrospect—inflected by something personal or historical that we don't know at the time of the happening—in retrospect the event actually was quite important, exciting, ecstatic, traumatic, and so on beneath the surface. Revising the ordinary, re-seeing it, really is important emotionally for me, as you said. Just as important in my reading as my writing. There's another side to this, too, a jittery element that comes from my attraction to obsessive subject matter. I'm awed by everyday obsessions—my own and others—like in the poem "Three Fresh Shelves, Left Wall of the Garage," where the man in the garage invests the mundane with such obsessive force that it's just about mystical for him.

SRPR: Why, honestly, do you write?

Tony: Poetry forces me to pay attention—probably more than any other art form does, though music and film come close. Poetry forces me to be patient, to slow down my intellectual and emotional attention spans and really listen to myself and others. I write from anxiety, too, a fear that some part of the world might go unrepresented unless it's shaped into language. I grew up in a household and extended family where a couple different languages were spoken, English and Italian, so I was fortunate to be exposed at an early age to all the ways language can fail to convey anything. My mother suffered from terrible hearing loss, and we took it for granted in our family that language flops as often as it succeeds. When I was in junior high, a friend and I created our own phonetic

alphabet because we were frustrated by the difference between the spoken and written word. I still compose first drafts of poems in this alphabet, a great way to hear the words as early as possible in the drafting. So when I really started to study language—not just poetics and writing, but also the broader range of humanities—it wasn't so esoteric to think of words as trustworthy and fickle at the same time. It was actually quite personal. Instead of being paralyzed into silence by this contradiction, it actually made the act of composition more exciting. Maybe because, in some ways, each new poem feels like a dare.

SRPR: You've written a scholarly book on Blake, H.D., and Ginsberg. Can you say how, if at all, these interests intersect with your own poetry. For instance, is there any intersection, say, at the technically sonic level—linebreak, rhythm, assonance, euphony, rhyme, etc—or are the similarities more evident in the genetic aspects of writing, say, for instance, in the acts of composing?

Tony: They definitely intersect with me. I spent so much time with their poetry and prose that it's almost inevitable that they'd intersect with my own poetry. I usually worked on my own poems the same days I worked on the book or revisions of it, so something in their poetics seeps into my work. In a very general way, the book traces how each poet turns the position of "heresy" into something "holy"—and, as a poet, I'm drawn to what this means for the imagination. Blake's inverted angels and devils from *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* stand as perfect symbols of the imagination this way.

But I'll be more specific about the three poets. I'm not interested in creating my own mythos, as Blake did, and I don't think I'm capable of it anyway. I'm interested in making sense of his mythos, for myself, all the same. But his emphasis on the "minute particulars," as he put, within his mythic structures is important to me as a poet—how the individual word is crucial in the landscape of the poem, and the landscape of the mind, for Blake. I'm inspired by Blake's obsession with the power of the individual word—its fluidity, the way each word can point to new ways of seeing (like the way he plays with "literal" and "littoral" in his long poem *Milton*, or, more broadly, his quarrel with the word "natural").

At a technical level, I'm more inspired by the resonant ways folks like Oppen or Levertov construct their lines—how they shape sparseness so that it resonates. Or, say, how Elaine Equi condenses emotional/intellectual complexity, and humor, in the crafting of each line. Which, thinking of my critical book, is just another way

of getting at how H.D.'s influence, as far as technique, is greater for me than Blake's or Ginsberg's. Her early Imagist work is important to me, and has led me to a great love of the Objectivists, especially Oppen, whom I've mentioned, but also Niedecker and Reznikoff. When I first read *Trilogy*, I was just absorbed by how she assembled the "minute particulars" of the Imagist impulse into the grand scope of an epic poem. Oppen once said that the trouble with Imagism was that you could write about the moon-rise over a pier without knowing anything about piers or the moon. Well, he has a point, I guess—but it's a better one about Imagism than about H.D. This kind of comment can't account for what H.D. knows in *Trilogy*, her religious study and practice, her ability to craft something syncretic, combining official and so-called pagan sensibilities in a way that is challenging and provocative rather than just mish-mash. And I'm drawn to how she does all this mostly in tight couplets, with end-stopped lines that are authoritative without being hierarchical, and line-breaks and stanza-breaks that sometimes feel like canyon leaps. I'm also hugely inspired by H.D.'s use of appropriation in *Trilogy*, especially the culturally authoritative voices of Freud—from her own analysis with him in the 1930s—and the Bible. Her appropriations fit smoothly and jaggedly in the poem, and they turn the same voices that might keep her down into a license to speak prophecy. Rewriting as she lifts the words of others—it's done just as nicely by folks like Marianne Moore, of course, another influence for me, and it's a big deal in contemporary music. So it resonates with my life as a musician, too. I no longer play music professionally on stage anymore, but I do voice-collage composition on my laptop, and the more I do this, the more I realize just how important appropriation has been in my music and my writing.

The Ginsberg intersection mostly involves compositional strategies, and a bit more on content than form. His candor means a lot to me. He wasn't just writing a body of work, but was writing a life—with all its confessings, rejoicings, terrors, ecstasies. I'm not writing the kind of poems that, say, you find in his last book, the spare-no-detail chronicles of the tragedy of his body giving out. But if he can write them, and really versify the gruesomeness, then I feel like I can write just about anything. His emphasis on spontaneous composition is important to me—but at the same time, improvisation and trusting your first instincts always has come easy for me from my musical training. Ginsberg revised, of course, despite the public persona of "first thought, best thought." Sure,

“first thought, best thought” was important to him: but he definitely did revise these “first/best” thoughts, as I talk about a lot in the book. But his emphasis on spontaneity is one of his greatest legacies. I’m happy about the permission he gives us to write first-draft material without letting the editors who live inside our heads get away with too much censoring. “Mind is shapely, art is shapely,” he’d say: with this in mind, your first-draft work will have a greater shapeliness than it would if you were mindless, which just propels the later drafts. This is something that, again, along with my musical background—constructing with an eye toward craft and spontaneity together— influences my composition process quite a bit. I don’t think it’s that much different from the way anyone creates. It’s just that Ginsberg was more vocal about this part of the creative process than many others.

SRPR: Your work here seems to be very story-oriented, narrative, representational, and almost, at times, fictive (characters, rooms, motives, settings): How is it that you’ve come to write this way? What influences led you here?

Tony: I’m definitely moved by the way narrative inspires trust in the representational—and, at the same time, the way we know deep down that the representations are fictions. My narrative influences don’t come exclusively from poetry. I’m thinking of the way stories are constructed visually and verbally, and with gaps in “sense” we expect from poetry, in Harvey Pekar’s comics, which I’ve been lovingly obsessed with since the late 1980s. Or the eccentric take on narrative in Henry Miller’s autobiographical novels, his *Rosy Crucifixion* series more than anything else. The poems of Philip Levine and Maggie Anderson have been important to me, as working-class narrative portraiture—the way I can see my own class background in their work, and the way storytelling in the poem is so important to making this kind of identification. But in a much different way, I’m also influenced narratively by the collage technique of Kimiko Hahn, especially her use of *zuihitsu*, or H.D.’s memoir prose pieces—because both poets find ways to sensitize their readers to the limitations of narrative without abandoning story altogether. I’m not sure if someone could trace these techniques directly to my poems, but they’re with me when I’m writing. Poetic narrative is for me cross-cut with associational and sometimes interfering images and phrases, or counterpoint rhythms that can irrupt within the standard narrative line. Narrative is personal to me, I guess, as much as it’s an artistic choice. My parents were children of immigrants who

came to the U.S. to work in various farming, mining, and factory communities. The colloquial oral histories my family told over dinner and at reunions had a great effect on me—stories of how they navigated the strange ways of the new country, and how their otherness unsettled them. I have an impulse for story that comes from their stories. But it's expressly a preference for narrative in poetry, a sense that the compressed language of poetry, and its self-conscious rhythms and image-making, can make the most opaque or elusive events speakable.

I can go on and on about narrative—probably since I feel strongly that what we call “story” in poetry is so different, so full of associational logic and the multiple voices of collage, than what we traditionally expect from prose. I'm thinking of one prose poem, specifically, in this issue. In “A Simple Worker's Notebook,” which is part of a longer chapbook-length series of poems on Oswald, I'm trying to create an Oswald so distant from himself that the more he tries to explain his condition, the more he's lost and left only with the explanations. I'm attracted to narrative in that poem, and the others in my Oswald sequence, at the same time that I'm letting myself get enticed by the moments where narrative necessarily breaks down.

SRPR: What are three things you absolutely would *never* write about?

Tony: Of course I'm tempted to say there's nothing I would *never* write about. But you probably wouldn't believe me, and I don't blame you. I like to write about writing, as in the Oswald sequence, but I don't like to write about my teaching or writing life. It's the same reason I'm not fond of movies about writers. No one needs to hear me whine about not having enough time to write. Teaching is very important to me. My classes inspire my writing, and vice versa. But I try to avoid writing about college/university life—you know, the sort of “autumn-leaves-falling” back-to-school melancholy nostalgia. I feel like this kind of poem appeals only to other poetry instructors. Not a very wide audience. But what's worse, these kind of poems tend to reinforce the idea that poetry is *only* a scholastic exercise rather than a public art form. Poetry suffers enough from this kind of misconception, and I'd hate to add to the suffering.