



POEMS BY GERARD LEGRO

Jerrold Levy and Richard Negro

Edited with an Introduction by Alessandro Porco

FIRST EDITION

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INTRODUCTION

INFANTS PISSING ADROITLY

It's been over sixty-five years since Jerrold Levy and Richard Negro—two pranksters with the right mix of bad attitude and artistic ingenuity—composed, circulated, and performed *Poems by Gerard Legro*. For a brief moment, in the spring and summer of 1949, they infused the Black Mountain College (BMC) campus in Western North Carolina with the Dada spirit of Zurich and Surrealist spirit of Paris.¹ Under cover of night, tucked away in the Swannanoa Valley, the campus's study rooms became smoke-filled poker dens, European

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1. In 1949, Levy participated in the infamous “Anonymous Blotch” prank. Over the course of a few days, some of Ilya Bolotowsky’s art students used a palette knife to randomly splatter paint on an unwitting canvas. The artists, including Kenneth Noland and Joseph Fiore, placed the finished painting in the school’s Dining Hall to inspire discussion and, simultaneously, to mock the legitimacy and sincerity of evaluative discourse about art. Described by Bolotowsky as “something between a Motherwell and de Kooning,” the painting’s messy style was also meant as an affront to the sensibility of painter Josef Albers, who preferred geometric abstraction and technical precision. Albers was scandalized, and Bolotowsky promptly defended his pupils, describing their collaborative effort as “post-Dali” and a representative example of “chance”-based art. See Ilya Bolotowsky, Interview with Martin Duberman, 14 June 1971, quoted in Martin Duberman, *Black Mountain: An Exploration in Community* (Evanston: Northwestern UP, 2009), 315-16.

classical music jumped to jazz, friends slipped into sheets as lovers, and Levy and Negro transformed into “Gerard Legro,” the seditious poet *par excellence*, with a knack for scatological wordplay (i.e., puns and portmanteaus), doggerel rhymes, and irreverent imagery. The satirical poetry yielded belly laughs that rippled across the college’s idyllic Lake Eden campus. Since 1971, the manuscript has remained unseen, collecting dust in a forgotten box in the State Archives of North Carolina—“out of key” with the more popular tuning of BMC literary history.² Only Mary Emma Harris ever makes reference to the manuscript’s existence in a single sentence from her study *The Arts at Black Mountain College*.³ Thanks to Jay MillAr and BookThug’s “Department of Reissue” series, this experiment in poetic collaboration, chance procedures, found poetry, and collage is available for the first time.

In the summer of 2013, with the assistance of archivist Heather South, I discovered a photocopy of the *Poems by Gerard Legro* MS in Box 71 of the Western Regional Archives, a former VA Hospital in Oteen, North Carolina. Along with the MS, Box 71 contains three other Levy poems: “The Song of Sweet Pat,” which is referred to as a “spoof on Charles Olson,” and two “random,” untitled poems from 1947 and 1949.⁴ In addition, it holds two short stories: “The Long

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2. Ezra Pound, “Hugh Selwyn Mauberley,” in *Personae* (New York: New Directions, 1990), 185.
 3. Mary Emma Harris, *The Arts at Black Mountain College* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1987), 153.
 4. The quoted descriptions of the poems are part of the cover page for Box 71 of the North Carolina Museum of Art, Black Mountain College Research Project (Western Regional Archives), which contains Levy’s poems and short fiction.

Walk” and “Two Portables,” for which Levy assumed the pen names “Mina Haweis” and “M. Streeter,” respectively.⁵

Jerrold Levy and Richard Negro began composing *Poems by Gerard Legro* in the spring of 1949 and completed a draft of the manuscript by August. That spring semester, as part of her Elementary Math course, professor Natasha Goldowski paired up Levy and Negro as lab partners, requiring them to work together and solve hundreds of math problems per week—mostly in the evenings.⁶ They became fast friends, collaborators, and inspired mischief-makers. *Poems by Gerard Legro* served as a relief valve, releasing Levy and Negro momentarily from the methodological pressure of mathematical proofs. In addition, the poems served as a means of ridiculing the poetry and pedagogy of Charles Olson, with whom Levy studied in both the spring (Reading and Writing) and summer (Verse and Drama) terms.⁷ As Levy recalls, “Olson almost alienated me entirely from modern poetry. I got along well with him and enjoyed his company but in the classroom I felt always that he was a charlatan and that his poetry was fake and a cheap imitation of Ezra Pound

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5. In an unpublished interview with Martin Duberman, writer and artist Fielding Dawson makes reference to a third work of short fiction by Jerrold Levy. The story is not in Levy’s holdings in the Western Regional Archives. According to Dawson, the story focuses on “a soldier in Israel,” and it includes descriptions of “[fighting] in the desert.” See Fielding Dawson, Interview with Martin Duberman, 14 March 1968 (Box PC.1678.16, Martin Duberman Collection, Interviews, State Archives of North Carolina, Western Regional Archives, Asheville, NC), 3.
 6. Jerrold Levy, “Why Black Mountain” (Box PC.1678.14, Martin Duberman Collection, Interviews, State Archives of North Carolina, Western Regional Archives, Asheville, North Carolina, n.d.), 7.
 7. Heather South, “RE: Levy Courses,” email to the author, 7 April 2015, n.p.

who was only good in my estimation.”⁸

10 | The performance history of *Poems by Gerard Legro* confirms Levy and Negro worked through an especially rainy season to complete the bulk of the manuscript.⁹ They performed the finished poems at “a big art show” commemorating the end of the Summer Institute (directed by Buckminster Fuller).¹⁰ The festivities also included a three-day Bach festival, a screening of Sergei Eisenstein’s *Alexander Nevsky*, a dramatization of Charles Olson’s “The Kingfishers,” and a performance of Fielding Dawson’s play *Bazzball*.¹¹ This is the first and only documented performance of *Poems by Gerard Legro*. Levy and Negro read “ten or twelve poems... and everybody thought they were great,”¹² despite Levy’s revelation, in the end, that the poems were “fake,” the result of Dada and Surrealist compositional methods that emphasized chance, nonsense, and uselessness.¹³

8. Levy, “Why Black Mountain,” 8.

9. Harris, *The Arts at Black Mountain*, 163.

10. Levy, Interview with Mary Emma Harris, 30 Nov. 1971 (Box 33, Spool 78, North Carolina Museum of Art, Black Mountain College Research Project, Donated Materials, State Archives of North Carolina, Western Regional Archives, Asheville, NC), 16.

11. Harris, *The Arts at Black Mountain*, 163.

12. The *Poems by Gerard Legro* copy text in the archive includes a total of thirteen poems—“not ten or twelve.” In an oral history recorded for Martin Duberman, Levy confirms that, in its final form, *Poems by Gerard Legro* contains a total of thirteen poems. See Jerrold Levy, “Black Mountain” (Box pc.1678.14, Tape #50, Martin Duberman Collection, Interviews, State Archives of North Carolina, Western Regional Archives, Asheville, NC, 1969), 8.

13. Levy, Interview, 16. For further discussion of literary and artistic pranks and hoaxes, see Kembreu McLeod, *Pranksters: Making Mischief in the Modern World* (New York: New York UP, 2014); K.K. Ruthven, *Faking*

POEMS BY GERARD LEGRO

**EDITED AND
WITH AN INTRODUCTION
BY
RICHARD NEGRO
AND
JERROLD LEVY**

A TRANSLATION FROM THE RUSSIAN

In the day of the first revolution
The Constabulary of the Holy Ghost
Rode the mountains
Saying:

| 45

“As it was in the beginning so it will be in the end”
Or, “If with experience of man and of spider,
With comfort to yourself blow millions up.”

Lenten ys come with briddes roun
Therefore love has many positions
On my knee, my breast,
Without bodily weight
Her soft form hardly touches me.
So smooth that my eye cannot rest
If her bosom did not move
On the grounds of indecency
In search of the young Wizard.

In the second day of the revolution
There was a worker
Who clinked with his spade
He had only one head and two arms
Four feet and two eyes
One ear and three teeth
But he was a worker
Who did not waste his time.

And in his turn he said unto them,
“And out of one of them came forth a little horn
Which waxed exceeding great,
Toward the South
And toward the East
And toward the pleasant land.”

SINCE PICASSO AN OUR FATHER WHICH ART

Some monstrous man mind
Who works like a steam turbine
Scorning the surface ricochet of
Sophistication,
Or in Summer's subways lifting
The subtle subterfuge of ladies skirts.

| 47

Through the comb twisted mountains
Gestures of late Picassoles
Wrought or unwrought so
By dainty blue berets who,
Sitting by brooks and dump heaps,
Do window; through the morning
And take its light
Strain through silk screen
(Or alternate by devious routes of stained glass)
Until past the seventh, reach
A senile print from Han.

Whereas morning
Twists itself around the mountains
Pushing its winds through
The end of Valley vacuum
Cleaner.

LUCY ON THE MARKET

48 |

That day in the markets
When silly sallow Lucy
Sells through long and unarduous hours
Seashells—rooted through
The beards of unfettered fishermen
That wave willy in the wind
Throwing unbeknownst
Their unsophisted desires
Upon

While the red lobster mourns his dead,
Ornating vanity under palm groves
Lucy
Whose time puffs smoke
Into irritated eyes of
Modern Physics and Causality
Opposed to this sort of stuff.

SENSE OF THE PAST

The strolling soldier
Taught to yodel by a village Mädel
Concentrates intently
The burbles of her breasts
While the succulent mincemeat
On the antiquated table
Echoes and rolls
As he glibly rides.
Then, stooping, sees
What once was plowed beneath
The shadows of Babylon.

There scenes of ancient city streets
Appear
And infants piss adroitly
Against the city walls.