Stanley Kunitz

I Am Not Done With My Changes

AN INTERVIEW WITH STANLEY KUNITZ

BY MARY JO PALUMBO

I AM NOT DONE WITH MY CHANGES: A PROFILE OF STANLEY KUNITZ

One hopes to remain open and vulnerable, to keep on being terrified by history.
Stanley Kunitz, *The Iowa Review*, 1974

A hush filled the auditorium as Stanley Kunitz walked slowly to the podium at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum on April 7, 2002. In one hand, he grasped a polished bamboo cane; in the other, a pale leather satchel filled with notes and poems. The 96-year-old Pulitzer Prize–winning poet looked out at the faces before him, comfortable in the silence. He began to read—not one of his recent poems, but "Around Pastor Bonhoeffer," written more than 40 years ago about a German Lutheran theologian who was hanged after participating in a failed plot to kill Hitler. The poem, one of a handful that Kunitz has written that directly address the Holocaust, imagines the pastor's thoughts before he chose political activism.

In the chapel of his ear
he had heard the midnight bells
jangling: *if you permit*
this evil, what is the good
of the good of your life?

PREVIOUS SPREAD A photograph of a 3-year-old Stanley Kunitz

The German theologian is compelled to take a stand. Perhaps Kunitz was writing also about himself, a pacifist who declared himself a conscientious objector but agreed to serve in some "humane capacity" when he was drafted in 1944. The fact that Kunitz, a non-religious Jew of Lithuanian descent, addressed the Holocaust by writing about a German pastor is emblematic of the conflicting emotions with which the poet faced the war.

Kunitz's willingness to confront and embrace contradiction has distinguished him as a poet throughout his career. It is also the quality that continues to make him, especially in the post-9/11 era, an invaluable voice. Though he is better known for relishing the Cape Cod shore and writing poems anchored in the natural world than for addressing political themes, he has spoken out forcefully about the poet as activist, anarchist, witness.

At the Holocaust Museum, Kunitz's final words met with a standing ovation.

"You cannot get at evil in the world today," said Kunitz. "It is built into our industrial and political system. It is rolling off the assembly line. It is being sold in the stores. It is not a person.

"Perhaps the best way to confront the adversary is to confront him in ourselves. We have to make our living and our dying important again, and the living and dying of others. Isn't that what poetry is about?"

Kunitz has every reason to rest on his laurels. Or at least every reason to rest. His appointment as Poet Laureate in 2000 affirmed "his stature as perhaps the most distinguished living American poet," according to *The New York Times* Book Review. In 1995 a collection of his poems, "Passing Through," won the National Book Award. He was awarded the National Medal of the Arts in 1993 and the Jewish Cultural Achievement Award in 2000. He remains active in Manhattan and Cape Cod nonprofit organizations that support young writers and of which he is a founder.

But in the months following the attack on the Twin Towers, just a mile from his Greenwich Village home, he received dozens of calls to speak and read his works. As violence continued to mount in the Middle East, his appearances took him from Smith College in Northampton, Mass., to the DIA Center for the Arts in Chelsea. He spoke at Cooper Union, Poet's House in Soho, the New School, the City University of New York and at the Whiting Foundation's annual awards for new writers.

Sitting in the living room of the spacious Greenwich Village apartment he shares with his wife, the artist Elise Asher, Kunitz describes how Sept. 11 recalled an earlier time of upheaval.

"There was the feeling that one had in the beginning in the mid-'30s when Hitler came into power and began sweeping into Europe that Western civilization was doomed," says Kunitz. "All that came back to me with the Twin Towers attack. The anti-Americanism, the anti-democracy sentiments. One feels the loss of a certain security, one's faith in the institutions of civilization. There is the thought that there must be something wrong with the world itself, with what we have done in the organization of states and society at large, that there is so much hatred and distrust in the world.

"Poetry historically has served as the voice of civilization itself, especially in its times of crisis—and this is certainly one of those occasions. There is a terrible will to live deep in the human organism. Poetry is there to express that will, to express the deepest thoughts and feelings of the human race."

An old recipe box at his side holds not favorite entrees but prized quotes by writers, artists and thinkers such as Carl Jung, Paul Cezanne, Lao Tzu, Gustave Flaubert, John Keats, William Butler Yeats, Gerard Manley Hopkins, John Milton and Walt Whitman. Among them is a quote by the 18th-century mystical British poet and engraver William Blake, with whom Kunitz became fascinated when he was a student at Harvard.

It reads, "Without contraries there is no progression."

Kunitz's own concept of the poetic imagination involves the notion that the human being is a clash of contradictions, caught between the primacy of animal instincts and the dictates of reason. To illuminate the idea, Kunitz retrieves a volume of his essays, skimming the pages with slender fingers like a chef looking for an enduring recipe, searching for an idea that has stood the test of time. The passage from his collection of essays "A Kind of Order, A Kind of Folly," published in 1974, was inspired by Blake.

> "The library and the wilderness, order and disorder, reason and madness, technique and imagination—the poet to be complete must polarize the contradictions... Of course, nobody goes to school to learn about wildernesses. Each artist can be trusted to discover his own."

Kunitz has reconciled opposites throughout his life. He is a pacifist who vehemently opposed fascism during World War II; a solitary poet who sought community urgently enough to establish centers for poetry in New York City and on Cape Cod; a renegade who shunned the poetry establishment early in his career, yet later taught at several institutions across the country, including Columbia, Yale, Brandeis and NYU. A writer who speaks publicly about the poet's responsibility to respond to the political and social climate of the day, he also fiercely defends the autonomy of the poetic imagination which may be wildly apolitical, which may be fixated by two snakes coupling in the garden as, in his words, "*the wild braid of creation trembles*."

Recent interviews with Kunitz have focused on his lush, multi-tiered garden in Provincetown where he spends summers tending roses and tiger lilies, lavender and hydrangeas. It is this garden that has been the source of some of his most familiar and intimate poems. But when asked to read after 9/11, he found himself turning to "Passport to the War," his second book of poetry, written before he was drafted into World War II.

When "Passport" was published in 1944, the poet had been busy digging latrines and scrubbing pots in Basic Training. The book "sort of fell dead without even a thump," said Kunitz in a 1985 interview with *Publishers Weekly*. It was not "a book to stir up patriotic feelings."

“Passport to the War” contains Kunitz’s darkest poems, filled with anguish and foreboding about the war. Interestingly, Kunitz had never read them aloud before Sept. 11.

“Night Letter,” an evening address to a loved one, centers around a nightmare that presaged the persecution and slaughter that would characterize World War II.

The nerves of commerce wither in my arm;
Violence shakes my dreams; I am so cold,
Chilled by the persecuting wind abroad,
The oratory of the rodent’s tooth,
The slaughter of the blue-eyed open towns,
And principle disgraced, and art denied.
My dear, is it too late for peace, too late
For men to gather at the wells to drink
The sweet water; too late for fellowship
And laughter at the forge; too late for us
To say, “Let us be good to one another”?

The poem concludes on a more hopeful note, offering a sense that human beings possess a “deep heart,” or source of compassion, that will not be annihilated by history’s legacy of suffering and slaughter.

Cities shall suffer siege and some shall fall,
But man’s not taken. What the deep heart means,
Its message of the big, round, childish hand,
Its wonder, its simple lonely cry,
The bloodied envelope addressed to you,
Is history, that wide and mortal pang.

The struggle between the sensibility of the poet and the demands of war began just short of Kunitz’s 38th birthday when he received his draft notification. As a pacifist, he agreed to serve as a medic. But the request was ignored. Kunitz said he was put through Basic Training three times.

“I told (the draft board), ‘I am by nature and conviction a pacifist. I will never kill another human being. It is not within my province or character.’ They became very negative about me. I was sent immediately to Basic Training, bearing arms and the rest of it. I went through torture. They knew I had no intention of shooting the enemy. They were punishing me with the worst chores, KP duty and digging latrines. They thought I was a Red. I thought it was a terrible misuse of whatever I could contribute.”

Eventually Kunitz started a camp publication, which won an Army award, and was put in charge of information and education for Air Transport Command in Washington, D.C. Refusing to be commissioned as an officer, he was discharged as a staff sergeant in 1945.

Kunitz wrote the poem “Reflections by a Mailbox” as he awaited his draft notification. He describes his horror at Hitler’s mad rampage through Europe.

When I stand in the center of that man’s madness,
Deep in his trauma, as in the crater of a wound,
My ancestors step from my American bones.

The poem ends with a reference to the Russian psychologist Ivan Pavlov’s behavioral experiments with dogs. The poem warns a torpid civilization to examine its actions, a notion the poet reiterates today.

Now I wait under the hemlock by the road
For the red-haired postman with the smiling hand
To bring me my passport to the war.
Familiarly his car shifts into gear
Around the curve; he coasts up to my drive; the day
Strikes noon: I think of Pavlov and his dogs
And the motto carved on the broad lintel of his brain:
“Sequence, consequence, and again consequence.”

> “An overtly political poem is in a few years outdated,” says Kunitz, sitting upright in a faded paisley upholstered chair. “Nothing is more alien to the poetic imagination than political rhetoric.”

In his apartment, Kunitz sits near a small solarium filled with flourishing plants. His polished wooden cane rests against the wall beside him, more sculptural ornament than functional tool. The many lithographs, drawings and paintings that adorn the walls were given by friends such as Robert Motherwell, Franz Kline, Philip Guston and Mark Rothko, who along with Kunitz developed their work in Provincetown during the Abstract Expressionist movement of the ’50s and ’60s.

The most striking piece in the room, however, is not one of these works but a luminous, disturbing landscape, five feet in length, painted by Kunitz’s wife. The black silhouette of a man lies prone in a pool of cerulean blue water. A fierce red sun is poised to sink below a darkening crimson and lavender sky. Asher painted the vibrant work in 1985 in response to one of her husband’s poems, “The Long Boat,” about a fisherman who loses his life at sea. A death voyage, as Kunitz refers to the poem.

“The murderous assault of Sept. 11 against the civilian population requires of us an effort to understand why we have discovered so many enemies in the world,” says Kunitz. “Why are we feared and hated? Why do the smaller, weaker nations feel we are hateful and unconcerned with their plight even though we think of ourselves as deeply engaged and caring people? If we don’t understand that, we have lost the battle.”

Kunitz distinguishes this time in American history from the earlier period when Hitler’s storm troopers were sweeping through Europe. He believes American behavior, political choices and policy decisions bear greater scrutiny now than during World War II.

“There has been a shift in American politics. We are in a phase where we think we stand for all the political virtues. Those smaller nations must be the ones to make radical changes, where we continue with the same procedures we have already instituted. We think we stand for all the positive values, and that those who are not our friends are the ‘evil’ ones—and be sure to put ‘evil’ in quotes. In this administration there is an attitude of unique virtue in the international complex. There is more smugness.

"I think we are throwing our weight around in the world. And we are encouraging those who are lost in the world to pin the blame for their poverty and despair on the world's great superpower, rather than finding the enemy within themselves or in their own country."

Kunitz, who supported Martin Luther King in the civil rights movement and protested the war in Vietnam, has long declared the role of the poet to be that of dissenter, the voice of the counterculture. At the Holocaust Museum, he quoted the French existentialist Albert Camus:

> "The writer's function is not without arduous duties. By definition he cannot serve those who make history. He must serve those who are subject to it."

In another public address Kunitz emphasized the poet's duty to respond. Just six weeks after the attack on the Twin Towers, he gave the keynote address at the Whiting Awards for New Writers in New York City. Kunitz quoted the Russian poet Anna Akhmatova, whose work he has translated. Akhmatova's husband, also a poet, was shot by the Bolsheviks, and her only son was imprisoned by Nikolai Yezhov, Stalin's commissar of internal affairs. Kunitz read the introduction to her poem, "Requiem":

> In the terrible years of the Yezhov terror I spent seventeen months waiting in line outside the prison in Leningrad. One day somebody in the crowd identified me. Standing behind me was a woman, with lips blue from the cold, who had, of course, never heard me called by name before. Now she started out of the torpor common to usall and asked me in a whisper (everybody whispered there):
> "Can you describe this?"
> And I said, "I can."
> Then something like a smile passed fleetingly over what had once been her face.

For Kunitz, the decision to become a poet is itself a radical decision, a choice to reject what he sees as the American myth of money, power and success. Yet poetry that is blatantly political, that tries to convert, runs the risk of being transient rather than timeless. The poet must walk a delicate balance between responding to his world and creating work that transcends it.

"An overtly political poem is in a few years outdated," says Kunitz, sitting upright in a faded paisley upholstered chair. "There is the danger that one falls into with political rhetoric, which is by its nature transitory. Nothing is more alien to the poetic imagination than political rhetoric."

The poet utters each word with precision, as if selecting it for a new poem. He gestures with his arms as he speaks, allowing them to linger in the air as though reaching for ideas from somewhere in the room. Perhaps the gesture itself evokes the iconoclastic William Blake, who claimed that as he wrote, he saw the words fly about the room.

"I regret that I haven't written more overtly political poems, though those are the most transient ones one can write. When I reflect on it, I realize that to live as a poet at all within a modern superstate, a modern superpower, is in itself a political act."

He voiced this notion in his speech at the Whiting Awards:

> "In a revolutionary period, the activists are understandably disappointed in artists who do not overtly serve their movement... Theologians of the left vehemently denounced writers in the '30s for failing to produce agitprop tracks… I think of the poet as the representative free man of our time. Since the industrial revolution, anyone who works for himself and alone has become a rarity. The writer is more different than others than ever because of his immediate, whole and solitary relation to his work in the midst of a society where men labor in packs or gangs and are productive only in bits and pieces."

Kunitz's own decision to pursue a life outside the academic or business establishments began early. After graduating summa cum laude from Harvard in 1926 and winning a prestigious poetry prize, Kunitz was discouraged from pursuing a teaching assistant's position at Harvard because, he was informed, Anglo-Saxon students would resent being taught by a Jew. Crushed by the rejection, he vowed to leave academia altogether. He worked briefly as a reporter for the *Worcester Telegram*, tried his hand at growing vegetables on a 100-acre farm in Connecticut and edited literary reference books. Almost 20 years later, he began teaching at colleges, but vowed never to accept a tenured position.

Kunitz believes it is the poet's responsibility to remain open and vulnerable, not only to history's injustices and abuses but also to the writer's own experiences, failings and losses. Whether the poet writes about salt water and sky or Stalin's infliction of torture, he must stare down his own demons, recognize his own contradictions, "face his own disasters."

A defining trauma in Kunitz's own life was the death of his father, who committed suicide before the poet was born. In 1905, Solomon Kunitz swallowed a bottle of carbolic acid in a public park in Worcester, Mass., at age 39, six weeks before his third child and only son was born. The dress-manufacturing business he had started with Kunitz's Lithuania-born mother, Yetta Helen Jasspon, was on the verge of bankruptcy. After Solomon's death, Yetta refused to speak of him.

Kunitz writes about this directly in "The Portrait":

She locked his name
in her deepest cabinet
and would not let him out,
though I could hear him thumping.

In the poem's final lines, Kunitz as a boy discovers a portrait of his father in the attic.

she ripped it into shreds
without a single word
and slapped me hard.
In my sixty-fourth year
I can feel my cheek
still burning.

In "Father and Son" as well as many other poems, Kunitz alludes to a father unknown or dead, a haunting or elusive figure. In this dream-poem, the narrator follows a ghostlike father figure down a dirt road, pleading for some kind of guidance or direction. He asks this figure for instruction in how to be gentle:

For I would be a child to those who mourn
And brother to the foundlings of the field
And friend of innocence and all bright eyes.
O teach me how to work and keep me kind.

The poem ends as the narrator and this ghost-father face each other, a chilling encounter with death.

Among the turtles and the lilies he turned to me
The white ignorant hollow of his face.

Death and life, continuity and change present another set of paradoxes that drive this poet. We are all, Kunitz has said repeatedly, changing and holding fast to some kind of personal center, living and dying at the same time.

Kunitz is quick to point out that his work has changed dramatically. He has said that his style has changed as he has changed. It has become simpler and clearer on the surface, more complicated underneath.

And yet poems he wrote during World War II still resonate for him today. He has changed and he has not changed. In "The Layers," a more recent poem, he writes:

I have walked through many lives,
some of them my own,
and I am not who I was,
though some principle of being
abides, from which I struggle
not to stray...

Though I lack the art
to decipher it,
no doubt the next chapter
in my book of transformations
is already written.
I am not done with my changes.

"In one's early stages, one hasn't concentrated one's energy on a single goal," says Kunitz. "As time goes on, we keep stripping the excesses, the diversions, the waste from ourselves. We are reduced to the mere phenomenon of survival and that's at the center of one's whole being. The real fight is to save one's soul and keep it alive. And art of course is the vehicle."

It is not surprising that this lifelong writer, whose most enduring relationships were forged with artists, would find the best illustration of his own ultimate paradox to be a visual one. Kunitz turns to his wife's painting, which hangs on the wall beside him.

An oversized bird, brilliant and orange, stands over the black corpse floating in the pond, nature perhaps reclaiming her kin at journey's end. Kunitz sees his own voyage in the painting, hears his own journey in his poem about a fisherman lost at sea. He acknowledges this simplest of paradoxes—the passion for life, the inevitability of death.

somehow he felt absolved and free
of his burdens, those mottoes
stamped on his name tag:
conscience, ambition, and all

that caring.
He was content to lie down
with the family ghosts
in the slop of his cradle,
buffeted by the storm,
endlessly drifting.
Peace! Peace!
to be rocked by the Infinite!
As if it didn't matter
which way was home;
as if he didn't know
he loved the earth so much
he wanted to stay forever.

"I suppose," says Kunitz, "this is my epitaph."