

Henry Seiden: Literalist of the Imagination¹

If not for Henry Seiden, this journal would not exist, and I would not be writing or editing “Reminiscence.” When Henry took the chair of the publications committee of the Division, there was no DIVISION|Review. After it was founded, under Henry’s vision and initiative, after he recruited David Lichtenstein as its Editor, and after David decided to include “Reminiscence” as one of its features, Henry asked me whether I’d be interested in editing it. We were having lunch at Sapphire, an Indian restaurant on Broadway, a few blocks from my office. Almost at its front door is a subway exit from which Henry emerged innumerable times, at the precise moment that we’d scheduled lunch. He used to say, “It’s always a pleasure having lunch with a shrink: they show up exactly on time. The remark certainly applied to him.

So Henry says to me “Would you like to edit the ‘Reminiscence’ feature?” I ask him for some time to think about it. The next time we meet, he says he assumed I was not interested, because I didn’t get back to him. I say, “But I am.” He, looking pleased, says he will commend me to David for that position. When we speak again, he says “Okay, you’re responsible for ‘Reminiscence’ .”

That’s how Henry worked. He got an idea, decided on the people to implement it and, before they could change their minds, had the thing rolling. As it gained momentum, everyone involved got the feeling that its existence was ineluctable, and that it was absolutely going to work. And, dammit, it did!

Henry was a “Yes!” person. He had very little tolerance for “can’t” or “wont.” This was not grandiosity, mania, splitting, or denial; it was a very practical form of inspiration, native to Henry. It was a pillar of his character. You can see it in his poetry, the trope consisting of palpable, familiar experiences that attain transcendence under the scrutiny of Henry’s inner eye.

I first met Henry in the fall of 1961 when we were both members of a small group of graduate students beginning the clinical psychology program at Teachers College, Columbia University. It was a poor fir for both of us, only Henry knew it and I didn’t. He’d been a Psych major as an undergraduate at CCNY, where the faculty included a panoply of deep and original thinkers, among them, Kenneth Clark, Joseph Barmack, Marguerite Hertz, Gertrude Schmeidler, and Max Hertzman. The eclectic and speculative spirit of Gardner Murphy, founder of the department, remained influential even years after his departure. In other words, Henry had been schooled in an intellectual climate that encouraged imaginative and divergent thinking.

The ambience at TC was far from congenial to anyone who’d had the benefit of a liberal psychological education. It was informed by a rigid application of empirical method that was called “molar behaviorism” by its proponents, Lawrence Shaffer, and E.J. Shoben and set forth in the book they intended as the Bible of the TC clinical psychology program, *The Psychology of Adjustment* (1956). It was one of the four or five ur texts on which all students would be tested in their comprehensive doctoral examinations. The thrust was to render psychodynamic thought respectable by fitting it to the procrustean bed of academic behaviorism. The other text that

¹ The title is a quotation from Marianne Moore’s poem “Poetry” From *Others for 1919: An Anthology of the New Verse*, edited by Alfred Kreyborg. This poem is in the public domain.

epitomized this approach was Dollard and Miller's *Personality and Psychotherapy* (1950). It was also heavily promoted in a widely read paper by Shoben titled, "Psychotherapy as a Problem in Learning Theory" (1949).

As you may well assume, Henry was unhappy at TC but, being Henry, could not and would not suffer in silence. In colloquia and seminars, his was often the challenging and dissenting voice, an inclination that fomented disapproval among the faculty. It was thus predictable that a particular professor whose tolerance for ambiguity was notoriously low, and who also had a talent for ascribing ordinary failings to moral delinquency, became the instrument of Henry's dismissal from the program. It happened quickly, without warning or recourse. One day Henry was with us; the next, he was gone.

I neither saw nor had any contact with Henry until 45 years later when I became the treasurer of Section I, Division 39, and began to attend the Division's annual meetings. By then, he was a very active member of the Section V board, and was making rich contributions to the vitality of the Division. I later learned that he had earned his PhD at the New School, a program from which it was difficult to graduate, but had a faculty that was far better suited to Henry's omnivorous intellect, and anti-doctrinaire view of the fields of psychology and psychoanalysis.

It was probably very early in the 21st Century, at a Division 39 spring meeting in some western city, that I was invited by Al Brok, to join him for lunch with an old buddy of his from his days at the New School. The buddy turned out to be Henry, also an old buddy of mine. The fourth person at that lunch table was Bob Prince, whom I had never met before. At that lunch, I learned that Henry's poetry was no mere avocation. He told me how seriously he had taken the writing of poetry as a primary life's pursuit, and how much effort he'd given to the development of his poetic gift. I was deeply impressed, because the 21 year-old I'd known at TC did not seem to be aimed in that direction. He'd been an iconoclast with political and intellectual interests, a pretty fair jump shooter when 3 or 4 of our classmates scrimmaged on the rarely used court in the TC gym, and an enthusiastic participant in our class's social gatherings. To find that he'd become a poet, was surprising and curious.

You may detect in the friction between Henry's version of psychology as a way of exploring all human experience and TC's rendition that ruled out phenomena that could not be reduced to statistics, the origins of debates that arose later in such guises as the opposition of evidence based vs. psychodynamic treatments; classical vs. relational psychoanalysis; clinical work as science vs. art; and discursive writing vs. poetry. Among all these binaries, Henry championed the second term. In his comments and questions at Division 39 board meetings, there were echos of the voice he'd raised at TC in defiance of the narrow zeitgeist. Henry's wit and eloquence would often cross the grain of a prevalent opinion to lay bare its weaknesses and the crucial matters it had failed to consider. He was never loath to nudge prominent noses from their joints, both to serve the greater good and for the sheer pleasure of ulteriority, a quintessential attribute of poets.

And Henry was, first and most, a poet, especially in his later years. On one of my visits to Forest Hills, he and I drove to a Jewish deli on Queens Boulevard. During the short ride, we spoke about writing. I said, "If I had your talent, I would put all my energy into poetry, not professional papers." The advice was sound, but overlooked the obvious truth that, by this time in Henry's

life, his profession was poetry. His work as a clinician, editor, essayist, and administrator contributed experiences and provoked memories that found form and expression in his stringent and playful verse.

Early in his adult life, Henry began to take poetry courses and workshops with fellow poets and established masters. He worked assiduously at acquiring the craft and aesthetic judgment to build the miraculous verbal structures that we are able to read in his volumes of poetry. He applied the many rhetorical, semantic and syntactical skills he'd perfected in his studies, to prose as well. The essays in his book, *The Motive for Metaphor*, culled from a column he wrote, first for the *Division 39 Newsletter*, and then for its successor, the *DIVISION|Review*, called "On Poetry," testify to his ability as a deep, close reader, and to his unconditional love of figurative language and all the devices—metaphor, metonymy, assonance, synecdoche, enjambment, etc.—by which it may become active. The copy of *The Motive for Metaphor* (2016) mailed to me by Henry soon after its publication, bore the inscription "Metaphors be with you," a sample of the way he packed worlds of allusive meaning into the microdot of a single phrase.

In addition to his published poetry and his regular articles about the poetry of others, Henry wrote three other books on themes that excited his interest. One, as yet unpublished, was about the longing for home. Its origins were confluent with those of his poetry, the Bronx neighborhood in which he grew up as the favored child of cultured and educated parents, and doting grandmothers. You can read about them in the poems: how he became a psychologist by listening to the two grandmothers who would not speak to each other, but spoke to him; how he was outed as a "Christ killing Jew" by a couple of older kids from a nearby parochial school; how, plying the surrounding streets, he learned to infer what was happening on the field at Yankee Stadium by the alternating patterns of crowd noise and silence, and how he tested his inferences by asking a fan who's just left the game, what had happened.

The Bronx, his first home, was a prototype for the concept, something embraced as familiar, warm, hauntingly eidetic, and yet elusive. If you'd have visited him in Forest Hills, you'd have understood that he brought from the Bronx a fascination with the singularities and complexities of place, as well as a receptiveness to the ways in which details of architecture, foliage, native speech, customs, and distinctive orchestrations of street sounds are a configuration that embraces and is embraced when the attunement is congenial. And, because Henry's first experience of place was predominantly sweet, his subsequent attunements were almost always congenial.

Thus, the visitor would know that Henry had a mental map of his Queens neighborhood in which many of the landmarks were restaurants: Ben's Deli on Queens Boulevard, the Chinese Dim Sum place, a few doors down, the Greek and Italian restaurants on Metropolitan Avenue. She would also be aware that Henry's and Sara's house was the last one at the corner of Ascan Avenue and Juno street that lay outside the boundary of the exclusive and affluent subdivision called Forest Hills Gardens. You could park your car on Juno Street to which their driveway opened, but all the spaces behind it would be reserved for residents of Forest Hills Gardens, and require a special parking sticker.

I like to think of this circumstance as symbolic of Henry's position as a defiant aristocrat, sufficiently patrician to occupy the same space as his wealthy neighbors, yet asserting his

renunciation of the principle by straddling the border, insisting on his proletarian roots and working class affiliation. He was, after all, neither entrepreneur nor plutocrat, but a consummate craftsman who earned his living by fashioning one unique therapeutic hour at a time.

Henry churned out a prodigious body of material about the longing for home, probably enough for at least two substantial books but, for some reason, he hesitated to publish it. Sara told me that she and her sons, Josh and Dan, will have to decide whether and how to bring it forth. In 2014, Henry was invited by Marilyn Metzl to present a paper on the subject to her colleagues in Kansas City. After accepting, he asked whether I'd like to come along as his discussant. I was delighted to be asked, and pleased to do it. It was a whirlwind trip. We took off from Lagaardia at about 10:30 AM on a Saturday in June, arrived in KC only slightly late for lunch, were whisked by Marilyn and Kurt (her husband), to the second best barbecue restaurant in the City where we gorged on several varieties of scorched flesh, fortifying ourselves for the presentation to which we then driven.

I recall that it was held in the conference room of a local hospital. The turnout was sparse. Henry spoke, I responded, there were a few questions and comments from the audience and it was over. We repaired to Marilyn's home and, later, were given an annotated tour of KC by our hosts. That evening, we were treated to a fine dinner outdoors at a prominent restaurant, and deposited at the hotel near the airport, where we managed about four hours' sleep before the taxi ride to the terminal and flying home. We were back in Lagaardia by 12:00 noon on Sunday.

The point of this anecdote is that Marilyn, a wise, experienced, and sensitive analyst, also a veteran Division 39 board member, where she'd gotten to know Henry, was so taken with his work on "home," and with him as a human being, that she asked him to come to her own adoptive home to share his views on how the containing surround contributes to the essence of human experience. For Marilyn, like many of us, is an emigre: she transplanted herself from Brooklyn to KC, and though eminently successful in her life and career there, she carries a meaningful encumbrance of indelible memories from the place she grew up in and left. I think she hoped that Henry's talk and presence would enrich and elucidate that pivotal experience. I infer this from her insistence on acquainting us with KC, its landmarks, architecture, distinctive tastes, and history, as an implementation of her intention.

For me, it was an opportunity to spend twenty-four consecutive hours in his company, time in which we traded stories, cracked jokes, were mutually supportive, and just companionable. As his discussant and accompanist, I was also the beneficiary of the royal treatment, great respect, and deep affection that Marilyn gave him.

If you check the Pep Web list of Henry's publications, you will marvel at the range of his enthusiasms and interests. There are twenty-nine entries over a twenty-seven year period from 1989 to 2016. In the 80's and 90's he focused on clinical applications of self psychology in two papers on "The Healing Presence," (1996 & 1997), and another on a concept he called "The narcissistic Counterpart"(1989). In 2004, however, he began to publish papers about the interface of poetry and psychoanalysis, the beginning of a series that remained unbroken until and after his death this year. These papers often take the works of the poets he loved as points of departure for

meditations on the reflective, transformative, and enriching interflow of feeling and thought that leads to the depths and nuances of experience we define as human growth. Interspersed with the poetry essays are pieces about the longing for home, the stories of Ernest Hemingway, and, in collaboration with his friend and colleague, Peter Lin, a comparison between the praxis of psychoanalytic therapy and that of the Chinese rendition of Zen (2016). And these are only the ones listed in *Pep Web*. There are scores of others both published and unpublished in which he developed the theme that I think was his keynote as a psychologist and writer: that human engagement is essentially a narrative and poetic process the goal of which is the attainment of reciprocal knowledge and the creation of meaning.

Two weeks before he died, Henry was hard at work, again with Peter Lin, on a paper about a metaphor involving the herding of oxen derived from the Zen tradition. They each describe the paths by which they approached becoming psychotherapists, using the steps provided by the metaphor. Henry asked me to contribute something from my own training experiences. I did. He tracked down all the references, gave me editorial advice that led to salutary changes in my piece, whipped the entire thing into shape, and submitted it to a journal only a few days before he died.

This was emblematic of who Henry was and what he valued: he loved words and the work of placing them one after another to form chains of meaning. *Poiein* is the Greek word from which the English “poet” is derived. It means one who makes, a maker. Henry’s core identity was as a maker, and his chosen materials were words, structured as poems, narratives, and concepts. He wrote them in his books and articles and spoke them in his consulting room, from the lecterns of innumerable classes, seminars, workshops and conferences, at the tables in board rooms and restaurants, and at the table where he ate meals with his family, boy and man. What he wanted to achieve by doing this was to make things clearer, simpler, more complex, richer, and yes, better!

Every summer for several consecutive years, I’d get an email from Henry inviting me to be a member of a panel he’d been developing for the Division 39 annual spring meeting. With greater or lesser prodding and encouragement from him, I would accept. He would invariably take the responsibility for collecting the abstracts and the bios, and sending in the submissions. The last of these were to be about the mutual influences of poetry and psychoanalysis—no surprise there. The third member of our ensemble was Maureen Murphy, who gave it the *eclat* of her stature as an analyst, having a strong penchant for verse, hailing from the exotic west coast city of San Francisco, with its rich poetic heritage, and unlike Henry and me, being of the female persuasion.

When Jill Bellinson was the program committee chair of Division 39, Henry and I prevailed on her to afford us a slot in a lunch hour series at the annual spring meetings where the focus would be on highly interactive programming with themes of general interest. Naturally, we favored engagement with poetry in ways that would evoke widespread participation. Our first stab at it was to present the case of “J. Alfred Prufrock” (Eliot, 1911), to our audience and ask them how they might approach him if he were referred to them for a consultation. Many people attended, and almost everyone contributed something to the spirited discourse.

Henry inherited the Chair of the Division 39 publications committee from Nancy McWilliams, who went on to become the Division's president. He and Nancy became close friends and reciprocally supportive colleagues for all the years that followed. Another close relationship that began with a mutual interest and involvement in publications was with Bill MacGillivray. Bill had edited the *Psychologist—Psychoanalyst*, an all purpose newsletter, cum informal journal of the Division. He, too, eventually became Division president. Henry replaced the *Psychologist Psychoanalyst* with two new publications, the *DIVISION|REVIEW*, and the recently discontinued online newsletter, *Insight*. During Henry's tenure as publications chair, *Psychoanalytic Psychology*, edited by Elliot Jurist had, according to the *Journal Citation Reports*, a 2016 [impact factor](#) of 1.068, ranking it 1st out of 13 journals in the category "Psychology, Psychoanalysis."

In addition to his work on publications, Henry was an active and creative contributor to the Division 39 Board, as a member at large, and simultaneously on the board of Section V of the Division. In all of his positions, he forged enduring friendships. Among this cadre were, Nancy [McWilliams], Bill [MacGillivray], Bob Prince, David Lichtenstein, Marilyn Metzl, the late Johanna Tabin, and me. If there are others whom I have omitted, my apologies. I have mentioned only those whose relationships with Henry I am familiar with, personally. There is a sense in which these friends were also Henry's "cabinet" in his role as publications chair. Writers, editors, speakers, and thinkers, their focus was to find enduring and contagious language for inner experience. They constituted a network for advisement, wise counsel, critique, feedback, support, and reciprocal potentiation of creative endeavors. Over the years of their collaboration, their respect and affection for each other and for Henry, whose projects often connected them with each other, grew deeper richer, and more binding.

Henry belonged to other friendship networks, too. The Saturday after he died, six or seven friends from his early Bronx years came to an informal shiva at the Seiden house on Ascan Avenue. They were people with whom he'd kept in continuous touch since the days of his childhood and adolescence that are rendered with such vividness and immediacy in his poems. Their talk was of those days, but also of the Henry they knew at each successive stage of his life, and the burgeoning complexity of their bonding over time.

And there were the people who learned of Henry through his poems: Phil Bromberg, for example, who saw in Henry's verse correlates of his own concept of self states; over the last years of Henry's life, the two developed a strong, dialogic friendship mostly on the telephone. Arnie Richards was so deeply impressed with Henry's poetry that he published two of his collections, *Spaldeen* (2016), and *How I Became a Psychologist* (2017), under the imprint of International Psychoanalytic Books. The friendship and support of both these men were extremely gratifying to Henry as he battled for his life, and pondered his legacy. The evidence that he touched people deeply through his poems must have been as great a solace as he could hope for.

Henry knew how to be a friend. To be close to him was also to be close to Sara, whose warm hospitality, quick intelligence, and erudition would quickly become integral to the experience. A guest would arrive at their home and, very soon, be sitting at the table in their dining room, its wood harmonizing with the earth tones of the decor and conveying a visual warmth that echoed their hosts'. There would be a variety of bagels accompanied by spreads, some of which would be novel, but delicious. There would be rugalach, cookies, Coffee in large,

wide cups, their middle circumferences made of unglazed ridges. Oranges, tangerines, apple slices and a variety of berries could be eaten with yogurt. All this as the matrix and lubrication of convivial talk that roved, rose, meandered and dipped, not exactly like free association, a little more structured and often with some goal in view, because Henry's inclination was to organize language either for the sheer pleasure of it, or to make something happen. There would be moments when nodes of insight would erupt from the stream of dialogue, be recognized, explored, and propagate variations, like a musical theme.

Not everyone with whom Henry engaged in the course of his very active career in Division 39 liked him. Though the impetuosity that had provoked the TC faculty when he was twenty-two was softened by time and experience, the threshold for its emergence was not so high as to preclude his becoming impatient and testy when he felt his initiatives and innovations were being challenged unfairly, or in ignorance of their value. He was bitter when the Division 39 board voted against raising the editorial stipend, and again, when they expressed disapproval of some of the more avant garde divergences of this journal. But his disaffection never lasted long enough or was of sufficient intensity to prevent the collaboration that was essential to the success of what he regarded as his mission to oversee publications of high quality and usefulness to the Division. Moreover, whatever grudges he may have carried were largely kept to himself; thus, they did not prevent his forming pragmatic alliances with anyone whose help he needed.

When I turned eighty, I threw myself a birthday party to which I invited about 90 people, all friends and family. Henry and Sara were, of course, invited. But to be admitted, the guests were asked to write an obituary notice for me, such as might appear in the *New York Times*. Had you predicted that Henry's would be a poem, you'd have been right on the money. So here are a few excerpts from that poem that I think will serve to round off this profile of our laureate.

“Things I Said to Bill and Things He Said to Me.”

At Teachers College in 1961 he wore ties and tweed jackets;
I wore yesterday's shirt.

After 1963, you might say we went to different schools together.
He went old school, which is to say psychoanalytic institute.
I went New School, which is to say, the one on 12th Street.

At Division 39 Board of Directors meetings in the 90's, he said
Section I (old school); I said Section V (new school). We both said
the difference was less and less noticeable.

We told jokes—especially when late afternoon somnolence
was setting in around the large rectangular table.

He'd probably prefer a sonnet to this to celebrate his birthday. But
I'm an informalist—although I no longer wear yesterday's shirts.

We said let's do a panel presentation. We said why
were we rejected? We said this several times.
We said, those idiots—they only want music they can dance to.

Fried means peace; Seiden means silk. We know Freud means joy.
Neither of us knows what Lacan means. But we're peaceful
and smooth.

We wax nostalgic. And we talk about nostalgia, about what it
means—about the sense of the future we had in the past
(in those days when we went to different schools together).

And we talk about *The Sense of an Ending*, about the inevitability
of endings...We know, Every tick demands a tock.

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