

A Surrealist Remembrance of Kenneth Rexroth

By [Stephen Schwartz](#)

I was born 69 years ago in Columbus, Ohio. The name of Kenneth Rexroth, along with those of Kenneth Patchen, Philip Lamantia, Charles Olson, Robert Creeley, and Henry Miller, prominent among the American literary nonconformists of the time, had familiarity for me from the beginning.

My father, Horace Schwartz, was a figure in the “little magazine” movement, producing an occasional periodical called *Goad*. He had been a student at Ohio State University, writing radio scripts and working as host on a folk music program at WOSU, the college station.

My earliest memory is of my parents meeting the English poet William Empson, who taught at Kenyon College in Gambier, Oh. I was especially impressed by Empson’s long, Chinese-style scholar’s beard! My father also went to Kenyon to interview Robert Lowell for WOSU. I became, later, a disciple of Empson, if in my own way.

My father’s best friend was named Richard W. Emerson, and issued a journal similar to *Goad*, but earlier, and entitled *Golden Goose*. Emerson is now forgotten, so much so that when his name surfaced not long ago in relation to a lost Kerouac document, he could not be traced. Once, however, I conducted the irascible and despicable book speculator Peter Howard to a meeting with Emerson, who sold him original editions of many titles by the Pound-Williams group.

Both periodicals printed the work of serious authors, but their titles betrayed a certain youthful attitude, a kind of “punk” ethos *avant la lettre*. *Goad* was named to evoke a wish to shove American thought out of its passivity; Emerson himself much later told me that the title of his “little mag” was chosen similarly, to suggest that American readers should be “goosed” or groped intimately without warning.

My mother was a member of the Communist Party, and in 1951, at the urging of Anna Morgan, a member of the top national Communist leadership, who lived in Ohio – and whose name elicited great respect from CP bigwigs many years later – my parents, I, and my as-yet unborn brother, with whom my mother was pregnant, moved to San Francisco. It is little known today that Ohio once had the third largest

state Communist organization in the U.S., after New York and California, because of its steel industry (Communists had created the Steelworkers Union) and its large, leftist Slav population. Another prominent Columbus Communist was sent to Los Angeles. My mom often laughed at how that Communist's toupee was ripped from his head by her pet cat.

Soon after our arrival in San Francisco, my brother Geoff was born. Richard Emerson was his godfather. I believe either Emerson or my father had been introduced to Rexroth by James Decker, a publisher in Illinois who had been forced to give up his business in 1949. The Decker Press had published Rexroth's [Art of Worldly Wisdom](#); my father had a copy of it, and of a second edition issued by Emerson's Golden Goose Press, in Sausalito, Calif. in 1953. As I recall, Emerson had acquired either the unbound sheets of the Decker edition or had reprinted the book from its original forms; the GGPress edition was of a different size, but not otherwise substantially altered.

Something perhaps unexpected happened when my parents arrived in San Francisco. My mother indicated to me before her death in 1997 that notwithstanding her fealty to the Communist Party, once in San

Francisco, and in the company of my father, the gravitational pull of the Rexroth circle, markedly anti-Communist and mainly oriented toward anarchism, was much more powerful than the discipline of the CP.

My father joined Rexroth's circle. Another figure, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, then calling himself Ferling, arrived in San Francisco, and my father was one of the first publishers of his verse – translations of the *Paroles* of the French surrealist poet and songwriter Jacques Prévert. These associations and constant visits led to my father being chosen to issue the first, mimeographed edition of Rexroth's [Thou Shalt Not Kill: A Memorial for Dylan Thomas](#), in 1955. I was six or seven then, and remember with absolute clarity my father on the sofa of our suburban home in Sunnyvale, Calif., assembling and stapling the mimeographed pages. The pamphlet, with mention of my father, was praised in a book by Henry Miller.

In succeeding years, Ferlinghetti and others in the group became famous – more so than Rexroth or even Miller – but the family connection between Rexroth and my father remained most alive for me.

In 1956 Ferlinghetti published Rexroth's translations, titled [Thirty Spanish Poems of Love and Exile](#) as the second title in the City Lights Books Pocket Poets Series. Two years later, Rexroth and his family made a journey to Provence, and sent me a large package of French coins and stamps – I collected both items – and the artistic and heraldic French stamps made a considerable impression on me.

Jack Kerouac's [Dharma Bums](#) appeared in 1960. I recall the shock of recognition reading Kerouac's description of "Reinhold Cacoethes" – obviously Kenneth – in [Dharma Bums](#). But in my consciousness, [Thirty Spanish Poems](#) had a much greater effect than [Dharma Bums](#). Rexroth had done his translations without knowing Spanish, and for me, this was an incentive to really learn the language and Iberian literature and culture in general. In 1988 I published the first serious volume in English on the POUM, the Catalan anti-Stalinist party about which I heard Rexroth comment in the 1960s, and I became, eventually, a cultural correspondent for the Mexico City daily *Reforma*, the most important Mexican newspaper. I have written on Kenneth in *Reforma*, a newspaper the role of which, in Mexican life, is presented accurately in the Denzel Washington film [Man on](#)

[Fire](#) (2004). I suggest frequently that those interested in attacking me, my family, or my personal reputation should study that film. Closely... taking notes... repeatedly.

When I passed puberty, I joined the Communist movement, but as I have written elsewhere, I wanted to be a Hispanic Communist – not an American Communist. The Cuban Revolution had taken place, and impressed me, but I believe Rexroth's example was more significant. Rexroth was also acquainted with Octavio Paz, the Mexican Nobel laureate, who became a friend and mentor of mine.

In high school, I published my first verse, and in 1965 Kenneth praised my juvenile work in a column in the *San Francisco Examiner*. I learned that the Communists in San Francisco bore an extraordinary hatred for Kenneth, alternatively bragging about his membership in their ranks and offering falsehoods to explain his disaffection from them. I began to understand the situation better after Kenneth gave me copies of Dwight Macdonald's magazine *politics*, a leading anti-Stalinist intellectual journal of the 1940s. Kenneth understood that the anti-Stalinism others considered irrelevant in the radical upsurge of the 1960s was, in

reality, more relevant than ever. Few agreed with him immediately.

Kenneth also introduced me to Czeslaw Milosz, another Nobel laureate, who Kenneth had encouraged to come to teach at the University of California at Berkeley, where I studied. Kenneth led me, via a New Directions anthology, to the epic surrealism of the Greek poet Nikos Gatsos. I frequented the salon at Kenneth's house (but did not, as misreported by Rexroth biographer Linda Hamalian, ever attend his poetry workshop at San Francisco State College, later University). I was a founder, with various of his friends, of a short-lived project called the Artists' Liberation Front (in which his wife Carol Tinker was involved early on). I lived briefly in the house occupied by Marie Rexroth, his long-term lover, with my then-wife and mother of my son Matthew, who is now 45. Rexroth was involved in creation of the National Endowment for the Arts, where I would become institutional historian.

Kenneth was generous in his advice and support. Paradoxically, I began to turn in a more revolutionary direction myself, even after leaving the pro-Soviet Communist movement in 1968. I evolved toward a rigidly programmatic and activist Trotskyism and association with the remnant of

the French Surrealists, becoming isolated from both Kenneth and my father – who had opened a business enterprise together, selling the piles of books Kenneth received as review copies. Such are the errors and convolutions of a youthful path; they are, I think, unavoidable. To be true to a revolutionary spirit is to necessarily undergo needless personal conflicts, especially when young.

The name of Milosz has its own arc into my later life. Milosz wrote eloquently on the Bosnian war of 1992-95, which affected me personally as the Spanish civil war of 1936-39 did Kenneth's generation; the Catholic Milosz is beloved among Muslim poets in Sarajevo. In 1999 I interviewed Milosz for a small conservative Catholic monthly in the Bay Area, *San Francisco Faith*, which I referred to then as the only intellectually free periodical in the region, although I was a staff writer for the *San Francisco Chronicle*. When Milosz died in 2004, I wrote on him from Dubrovnik, and invoked Kenneth.

I was driven further from Rexroth in the 1960s after becoming a disciple of the "orthodox" surrealist poet Lamantia, who was as doctrinaire as myself but also, like the Stalinists, given to extraordinary hatreds. Lamantia had never been

considered a member of the French surrealist group, unlike me, because he could not speak their language. He resented Rexroth greatly, referring to him as “Satan,” and to cleave to one became, necessarily, to avoid association with the other.

Throughout the succeeding years, however, Rexroth remained a mentor, even when absent from San Francisco after his appointment to a faculty post at the University of California at Santa Barbara. I read his columns in *San Francisco* magazine – which gave ammunition to Lamantia and other pseudo-surrealists, who denounced Kenneth for “selling out” to the San Francisco establishment.

Kenneth and Philip were the two opposing poles of the San Francisco Renaissance, which had a strong Surrealist flavor and was distinct from the Beat excitement. Kenneth was born in 1905 and Philip in 1927. Readers will find videos online in which both men read their work, and much is to be learned from such viewing.

Kenneth had a 1920s personality, reminiscent of Chicago anarchism and Chicago Bohemia, which produced the Haymarket martyrs of 1886 and the speakeasy scene remembered best for the rap forerunner Lord Buckley. Rexroth had a Corn Belt accent and

reveled in Midwestern associations, telling my dad, who hailed from Nebraska, that he liked him and my uncle Eddie – who survived atrocious treatment at Japanese hands in World War II – because they were “Jewish hicks.” By the time I warmed to him as a mentor, I was deep into surrealism and had already been admitted to the Paris group. Kenneth had known the work of many surrealist writers, such as René Crevel, who influenced me stunningly. Crevel had committed suicide as a protest against Stalinism in 1935. In general, Kenneth was magnanimous in supporting my literary aspirations.

I had known of Lamantia since early childhood but became inveigled with his personality after meeting him as an adult. If Kenneth resembled a wealthy bootlegger, Philip looked like a defrocked Catholic priest. Kenneth was athletic and walked endlessly in the California mountains, as I sought to do. Philip was a sedentary recluse. Philip’s anarchism and Bohemianism were San Franciscan, Mediterranean, and Pacific.

More significantly, however, Philip was ungenerous and competitive. He treated me as no poet at all, comparing me with the evil Verkhovensky in Dostoyevsky’s *Demons*, rejecting even the most trivial remarks, and placing absurd barriers

in the way of my least efforts. He could not translate verse but condemned all translations of the surrealists as bad. When I mentioned in passing how pleased I was to find a copy of Denis De Rougemont's [*The Devil's Share*](#), after 30 years' search, he sneered, "I read it in 1945." Well, yes. He was in New York when it was published and was older. To him that seemed an accomplishment. He claimed to be a mystical mathematician and one day he demanded of me, "let's see what kind of *geometer* you are." I was no *geometer* at all; I had barely passed the course in high school. I wrote a preface for the second edition of his [*Touch of the Marvelous*](#), but he and his epigones suppressed mention of it.

Kenneth introduced me to the examination of Buddhism, and although I was brought up in an antireligious atmosphere, and hoped never to repeat the experience I had as a blind adherent of Stalinist Communism, I was a secret believer in the Creator. I did not become a "shopper for God" in the California style, but after my introduction to Buddhism through Kenneth, I observed his involvement with Christianity – partly in its Orthodox form, justified for him by the Greek language of the Gospels. I went to Japan in the same manner as Gary Snyder, as

recommended by Kenneth, shipping out in the Sailors' Union of the Pacific (and later becoming the SUP's official historian, leading to the publication of my first major book, [*Brotherhood of the Sea*](#) [1986]). I also went to Korea. I had married a woman of Burmese descent; I undertook to study Central Asian culture at Berkeley, and partially fulfilled my desires by going to Samarkand.

I studied Protestant Christianity, and later Catholicism and Judaism, but finally opted for Islam after working as a reporter and civil society activist in the Balkans in the 1990s. When the first bestseller among my books, [*The Two Faces of Islam*](#), was published in 2002, 20 years after Kenneth's death and my attendance at his wake in a small Russian Orthodox Church in San Francisco, I acknowledged his inspiration. Because of Kenneth Rexroth, I followed the profession of writing; learned languages (French, Spanish, Catalan, Bosnian, Albanian, Romanian, Italian, Russian); fought against Stalinism; wrote authoritatively about phenomena close to Kenneth's deepest feelings, like the SUP and the POUM; traveled twice, so far, around the world, and finally, embraced a mystical form of an eastern religion.

But unlike Kenneth, I left San Francisco – late, at 50 – moving to Sarajevo. Today, I reside between Sarajevo,

Barcelona, and San Francisco. I am reunited with my greatest love, Rebecca Long, film maker and artist. Rebecca is Venice to my Constantinople. She is the beautiful and wise goddess-city of the West, whose power is without parallel. She makes and breaks dialogues with a word. She is fearsome in her wrath but also generous in her love. Incredibly generous. She is a superlatively great mother. I am Constantinople, arrogant in pride over my conquests, male as the steppe but drawn into the world of Western pleasures. I come to Venice in hope that she will grant me a poor plate of rice with saffron. I am a Muslim but will sneak a glass of wine when I am in her presence.

Constantinople suffers catalepsy, falling asleep with the rigors of endless dancing. Venice waits in the palace of her exalted thoughts to slap Constantinople out of its slumber. Thus the Battle of Lepanto, that endless dream that troubles me. She is the woman promised to me by Ibn Arabi: “When she walks on the glass pavement you see a sun on a celestial sphere...

“When she kills with her glances, her speech restores to life, as if she, as a giver of life, were Jesus.

“The smoothness of her legs is like the brightness of the *Torah*, and I follow it and walk in its steps as if I were Moses.

“She is a female bishop, a daughter of Rome, unadorned, with a radiant goodness.

“Wild is she, none can make her his friend; in her solitary chamber she has a tomb for remembrance;

“She has baffled every learned scholar in our religion, every student of the *Psalms* of David, every Jewish doctor, and every Christian priest.”

As the Cuban poet Heberto Padilla declaimed,

“Time, which heals hearts

Honors poets right or wrong

And will honor Stephen Schwartz

For having loved Rebecca Long.”

Still, I owe nearly every success I have been granted to the presence in my life of Kenneth Rexroth.

The following poem of mine is not about Rexroth, but mentions Empson. It is among few I have composed in reference to that time, and to my father and his associates. The Balkans are a constant in my life, anticipated by the visit to the region of my friend Claire, when she was young, and the new friendship of my

brother Ismail Royer. If there is a
Rexrothian thread there, it is the poem
Amorgos, by Gatsos, which I now still
read when I feel my heart has been
wounded.

I.

At night in Sarajevo, in rain clean
after two years of peace,

I walk along Kulović street, where a
Jewish friend once lived,

So narrow as it enters Marshal Tito
street –

To the corner where so many died in
the storm of shells.

I walk past the Partisan monument, in
the Slavic world.

Joining the *korzo*, I mingle on
Ferhadija street

With a mob of beautiful youths, that
seems Mediterranean,

Ending at the Husrevbeg mosque, at
the hour of Muslim prayer.

I hear the voices of *mujezins* from a
dozen minarets

In another mingling, mixed in a
common challenge

To the night and the noise of discos,

And beneath the Bosnian moon, and
the Bosnian stars

I remember a Mexican song.

II.

“Dame la mano paloma

Para subir a tu nido

Lástima que duermes sola

Yo vengo dormir contigo”

The lyric is recorded in Mexican
folklore,

In the swamplands of Tabasco,

In Yucatán, Oaxaca, and Veracruz,

As I was told by the poet Gabriel
Zaid.

But the song is also Jewish, and
Bosnian,

Sung for generations in Sarajevo.

As the Spanish I heard in the
synagogue

On sabbath eve, when the few Jews in
Sarajevo

Gathered for a memorial *limut*, is also
Bosnian.

From Spain to Bosnia, from expulsion
to expulsion,

Suffering crosses the world, like a
tropical storm.

I stand on a riverbank, mouthing
words I barely know.

It's Sarajevo, the Miljacka, and I'm
trying to learn Bosnian.

Washington-San Francisco

2008-2018

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