

# SAMUEL HAZO: EVERYBODY'S AUTOBIOGRAPHER.

Mike Aquilina



**Samuel Hazo  
as a Youth**

Source:  
Duquesne University Archives

Poets are, according to Samuel Hazo, the “autobiographers of everybody.”<sup>1</sup> And that line is eminently true of the man who said it.

Fall 2016 marked the release of *They Rule the World* (Syracuse University), Hazo’s twenty-ninth collection of poetry in some sixty years of writing. His published poems – beyond numbering – distill the experiences of a full life, from an urban childhood to suburban retirement, from youthful military service to a half-century in the classroom, from young love to grandparenting.

By his skill and his staying power,

Hazo has managed to give voice to a whole life, with all its ordinary love, labor, desire, and grief.

His work has drawn steady recognition. He holds a dozen honorary doctorates. His 1972 collection, *Once for the Last Bandit*, was a National Book Award finalist. He was Pennsylvania’s first (and so far only) Poet Laureate. Richard Wilbur has praised Hazo’s poems as “a spare, sparkling flow of good talk ... utterly engaging.” Dana Gioia speaks of “the tangible radiance of his work and his life.”

At eighty-eight, Hazo shows no sign of slowing. *They Rule the World* contains all new, previously unpublished material.

“They,” in the new book’s title, are the dead – the multitude of losses accumulated in the course of a long life. While others might see the dead fade to gray and then to nothing, Hazo identifies them as the true rulers of his world, ever present in the poet’s memory and imagination. Playing backgammon and discussing Plato, his brother and father endure as more than shades. FDR and JFK are “quotably alive.” Marilyn Monroe abides “in all her blonde availability.” The opening poem – like the book as a whole – celebrates a curious communion of saints, whose deeds and speech and performances continue to “rule” a heart that keeps on beating when their own have stopped.

Mortality is a recurring theme in these pages, though the poems are never morose. The poet, habitually unflinching, faces the inevitable (“there’s no defense”) with wry wit.

Suddenly  
my grandson shaves and drives  
and both his sisters know what  
makeup means.  
My niece  
reminds me with a grim smile  
that expiration dates exist  
for everything.

He meditates upon the deaths, in turn, of Bing Crosby, Tennessee Williams, Thomas Merton, and Sigmund Freud. “Not/a Shakespearian ending in the lot.” Yet all in their legacies are “breathing/still and on and on.”

The poet imagines the closing out and packing up of a house. As he outlives his friends, colleagues, family members, he claims kinship in one poem with “the last unfallen leaf.”

Still, as he rummages his memories he gains new epiphanies about long-ago voyages abroad (“The French Are Like That”). On his sixtieth anniversary, he looks with his wife at their old wedding photos and recognizes: “Today we’re near the end/of February, the month that’s said/to take the oldest and the youngest.” And yet the days hold intimations of immortality.

We feel the change  
of seasons now both physically  
and metaphysically.  
Either way  
we trust it finds the two  
of us again still one  
as always.

Indeed the love poems are among the strongest in this collection, which is dedicated to the poet’s wife, Mary Anne. In the book’s closing lines he praises her for many things: “For smiling truthfully/in photographs ... For laughing until/you have to sneeze ... For knowing/that money is better to give/when alive than leave when dead ... For proving that silence is truer/than talk each time we touch/or look into each other’s eyes/and hear the silence speak.”

Love, for such a poet, is stronger than death. And poetry is a worthy and necessary vessel of love.

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Poetry’s *necessity* is a constant theme in Hazo’s work.

He began writing poems during his seven years of service in the Marine Corps. Having completed his undergraduate degree at Notre Dame, he pursued a master’s in literature at Duquesne University. In his thesis he explored the terms and techniques of Gerard Manley Hopkins’ revolution in poetics.

He received his doctorate from the University of Pittsburgh, and in his dissertation (1957) he explored the esthetics of contemporary French philosopher Jacques Maritain. “Maritain,” he would later recall, “was describing what happened to me and in me when I wrote a poem.” His dissertation is the only book about Maritain for which Maritain himself wrote a foreword.

A devout Catholic, Maritain often repeated a line he attributed to Saint Teresa of Avila: “Without poetry, life would be unbearable.”



**Professor Hazo looks on as President McNulty recognizes Princess Grace at Duquesne University convocation in February 1978, at which she received an Honorary Doctor of Humane Letters Degree**

Source: Duquesne University Archives

Poetry was an essential component of Maritain’s cultural vision – what he called “integral humanism.”

Hazo’s own contributions in esthetics served to advance the case. Poetry, he argued in one place, “is as indispensable to life as bread.”<sup>22</sup> Elsewhere he stated, “poetry is as essential to our spiritual lives as oxygen is to our physical lives,” insisting that this “is not a mere figure of speech.”<sup>23</sup>

[N]umerous institutions and their representatives look at man in partial terms. To advertisers he is a consumer.

To politicians he is a voter. To television producers he is a viewer. To corporations he is something called personnel .... Only poetry regards man in his totality.<sup>4</sup>

And so Hazo took up the cause of poetry – not only by writing it, but also by promoting it, cultivating it in others, and laboring to restore it to its rightful place as “public speech.” He did this at a time when technocrats and even literary critics were announcing poetry’s demise.

As founder (in 1966) of the International Poetry Forum, he was poetry’s ubiquitous ambassador and evangelist. In forty-three years of the Forum’s programs he hosted live readings by more than eight hundred poets, including Nobel Prize winners Seamus Heaney, Derek Walcott, Octavio Paz, and Czeslaw Milosz; Pulitzer Prize winners W.S. Merwin, Maxine Kumin, Richard Wilbur, Galway Kinnell, and others. W.H. Auden was an early and ardent supporter.

Hazo also identified celebrities who were votaries of poetry – Gregory Peck, Princess Grace of Monaco, Eva Marie Saint – and recorded them reading from their favorite works. His audio and video archive of readings probably surpasses that of the Library of Congress.

For Hazo, and for those whom he enlisted in the cause, poetry is not a merely private passion, not a hobby or avocation or lifestyle choice, but rather a public component of any culture that is truly alive.

The marriage of poetry and public life is not, nor has ever been, a forced marriage in human history. The visionary voice of poetry is heard in the words of the Old Testament prophets, in the beatitudes of Christ, in the lines of Sophocles and Virgil, in the ballads of Francois Villon ....<sup>5</sup>

He is, of course, not the first to speak of the “publicity” of poetry. Robert Frost contended that poetry, like marriage, “starts with a thing as private as love, and then moves to the public ceremony of a wedding.”<sup>6</sup>

The French literary scholar Henri Brémond compared poetic inspiration to the grace of prophecy. It is, he averred, not merely for private edification; poetry demands a public proclamation.

[C]ertain graces are not given to the soul for its own sake, but for that of others ... The poetic gift has that in common with these graces: one is not a supreme poet for oneself, but for the public; the poetic gift corresponds in the natural order to what the prophetic gift stands for in the supernatural.<sup>7</sup>

Hazo, in his turn, dared to ask: “Why shouldn’t poetry occupy a central position in our cultural life?”<sup>8</sup> And then he went on to do something about it – again, not merely writing poems, but creating the optimal conditions for others to write poems. “He has been both a prolific poet,” Dana Gioia has said, “and a generous patron to other poets.”

As poet laureate and as president of the Poetry Forum, he traveled at his own expense to give readings. That is the *ordinary* form of poetry’s publicity. But he has also written poems of extraordinary public significance. One stands as the dedication of Pittsburgh’s cathedral. Another is actually carved in stone, at the state capital, in the memorial to Pennsylvania’s Medal of Honor winners.

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Poetic intuition is, for Hazo as for Brémond, a gift analogous to grace. Hazo recently wrote:

Poetry and belief have this in common. They come to exist within us in their own good time and at their own preference, never at ours. We cannot summon either of them when we choose any more than we can summon the exact moment when we will experience unignorable love for a

particular person. Poetry and faith and love rhyme in this way. We are unable to initiate through our own power what prompts any of the three to possess us. We can only acquiesce and cooperate with them when they do, which is why poets and saints and lovers are said to be 'touched' or chosen. They are incapable of choosing themselves.<sup>9</sup>

And a poem, like grace itself, does not destroy nature, but elevates it and perfects it. At least that's what a realist like Maritain would tell us; and Hazo is nothing if not a realist. He once wrote: "The act of writing a poem is an act of faith in the real present – the underlying present that exists beneath appearances. It is also an act of faith in the present to come – what we call the future."<sup>10</sup>

For a generation and more, critics had met such realism and humanism usually with disdain. Exalted instead are poems obscure to the point of opacity – or edgy, angsty dispatches from the further reaches of pathology. The poets praised by academic critics often defy "publicity" and, indeed, show contempt for the ordinariness of "the public" and its common speech.

Hazo, for his part, has stayed aloof from the poetry wars. Though his style is distinctive and his methods principled, Hazo has always shown profound respect for the freedom poets exercise as they respond to the gift. He has avoided the polemics characteristic of academic poets of the past generation. He is neither a formalist nor an anti-formalist. In his early work, he often followed received forms; in his later work he inclines toward freer forms. He delights no less in rhyme today than he did in 1958; but today he tends to slip his rhymes *within* his lines rather than at the end. Let the reader be always alert.

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For almost sixty years now, Samuel Hazo – in his poems – has spoken our ordinary experiences into presences.

He has, of course, written in other genres. His essays have been gathered into many collections. His 1963 book *The Christian Intellectual* was lavishly praised by Mark Van Doren, John Courtney Murray, S.J., and Robert M. Hutchins, among others. He has published four novels, written six plays, and even served as librettist for a flamenco drama.

His vocation, however, has been poetry; and his response to that vocation has been nothing short of heroically charitable, in the deepest sense of the term. What Samuel Hazo received as a gift, he has given as a gift. Dana Gioia put it well: "his work and his life exemplify what it means to be a Catholic writer."

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Princess Grace of Monaco is greeted by Fr. Henry J. McNulty (President, Duquesne University) on her arrival at university campus in February 1978. Samuel Hazo is at left.

Source: Duquesne University Archives



Samuel Hazo and Princess Grace of Monaco, February 1978

Source: Private Collection of Samuel Hazo

#### Endnotes:

<sup>1</sup> Samuel Hazo, *Poetry's Time, Poetry's Place* (Pittsburgh, PA: International Poetry Forum, 1996), 80.

<sup>2</sup> *Poetry's Time, Poetry's Place*, 88.

<sup>3</sup> Samuel Hazo, *The Stroke of a Pen* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 2011), 8.

<sup>4</sup> *Poetry's Time, Poetry's Place*, 88-89.

<sup>5</sup> *The Stroke of a Pen*, 12.

<sup>6</sup> John Ciardi, "An Interview with Robert Frost," in *Dialogue with an Audience* (Philadelphia, PA: J.B. Lippincott, 1963), 173.

<sup>7</sup> Henri Brémond, *Prayer and Poetry: A Contribution to Poetical Theory* (London: Burns, Oates & Washbourne, 1927), 156

<sup>8</sup> *The Stroke of a Pen*, 6.

<sup>9</sup> *Poetry's Time, Poetry's Place*, 90-91.

<sup>10</sup> *Poetry's Time, Poetry's Place*, 86.