

Knowing John Gogol — A Tribute

By Poet Walt Curtis — July/August 2015

What a privilege! I am one-eighth Polish Jew. Friedmansky. John identified that family root.

Gogol is perhaps the greatest intellectual I have ever known. He was a close friend of Joel Weinstein of *Mississippi Mud* magazine. Joel is buried in Lone Fir cemetery. He helped, pre-Internet, lay out *American Indian Basketry* by hand. An ethnographic masterpiece. Highly collectible.

Mr. Cogito and *Mississippi Mud* are the greatest literary magazines in Portland history. I should know.

Both publishers founded my writing career. Weinstein first published *Mala Noche* in 1977.

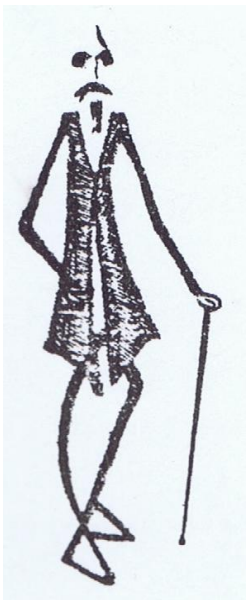
Gogol graduated from the University of Washington in 1965, receiving an MA in German. He was then awarded a Fulbright and a Carnegie travel grant to the Soviet Union. A life-shaping experience. Later on, he taught Native American studies at Pacific University. Meeting Robert A. Davies, friend of Ursula K. Le Guin. Heady stuff!



John Gogol & Walt Curtis at the gathering commemorating the April 2000 passing of Walt's mother Margaret — photo © 2000 David Milholland

Why did John and I hit it off as friends? Because we were poets? Both with gay backgrounds. We never had sex. We had intellectual love and respect for poetry internationally. In Greek, it's called AGAPE. Like Plato. Like philosophy. John Gogol was fluent in English, Polish, German, and Russian. An expert in comparative languages.

In *Mr. Cogito*, Gogol and Davies published chapbooks and translations from Eastern Europe. John corresponded with the oppressed writers in pre-Glasnost times. Where are the letters? Bookman Charles Seluzicki and I want to know. The Polish poet Zbigniew Herbert created the alter ego "Mr. Cogito." A dapper professorial humanist facing off the insanity of history. Does history matter? Witness NATO and the USA starting a new Cold War in Ukraine.



Mr. Cogito



Mr. Cogito cover graphic © 1993 Tom Cassidy

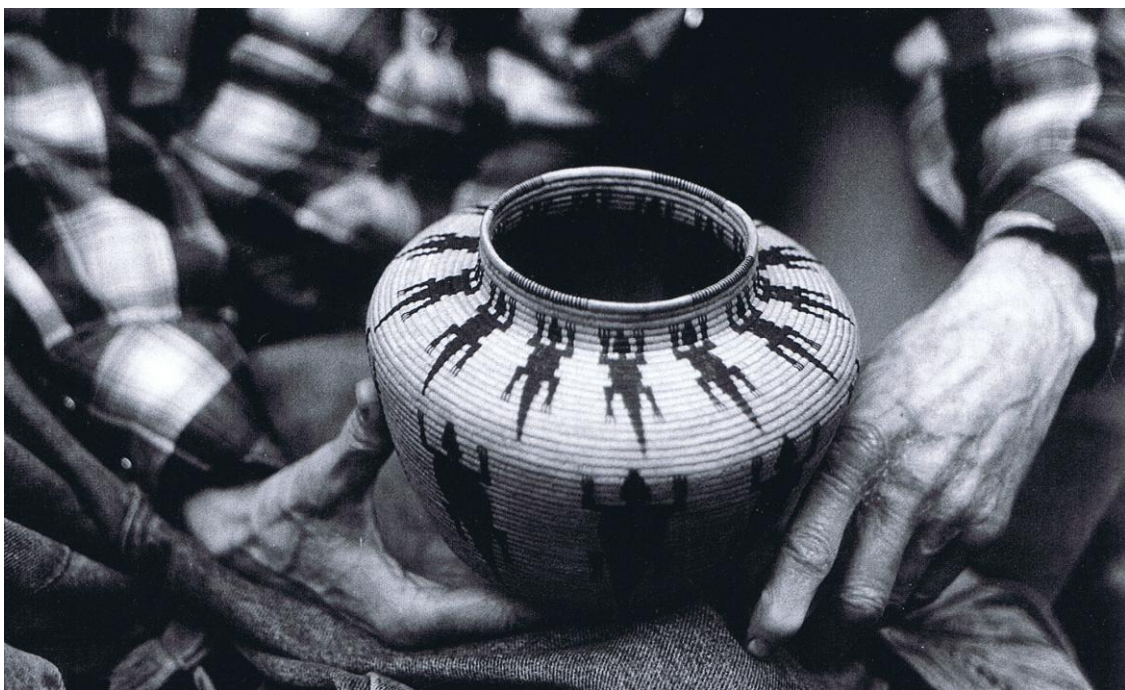
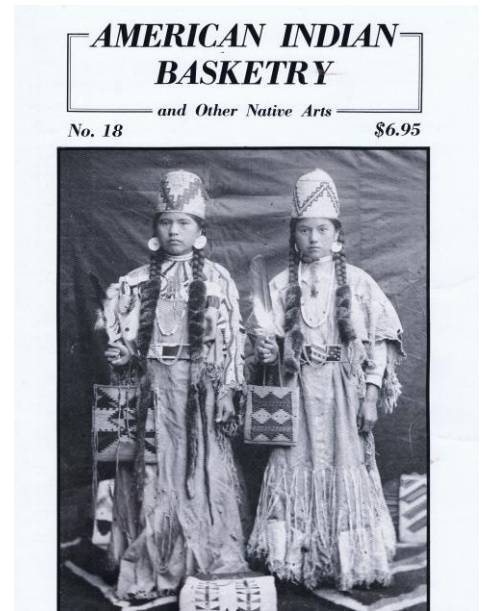
What a wonderful intellectual friendship we had! Lillian Pitt and Mary Schlick were John's friends, too. Mary wrote the definitive *Columbia River Basketry* book. She inscribed, a copy to John, her mentor. 1994. Warm Springs. I try to reach her on the phone. No response. John Gogol flew away. Like the shaman he was. He was bored with the Laurelhurst Village nursing home because of Parkinson's. He felt trapped and it was time to transcend the earthly zone. We all go to the ancestors, no coming back.

On the day of his death — July 23, 2015 — I desperately wanted to have a Buddhistic moment with him!. Buddhists believe the soul hovers around the body for a time. Certain rites are necessary. I also wanted an historical photo like a 19th century death mask. Emotional, I called notables—poet David Hedges, David Milholland, John's partner Steven White, and photographer Markus Shearer.

The body was in transit. Crown Memorial crematorium is in Tualatin. Not possible today. Costs extra. Only 15 minutes to view the person. Three persons only. Poppycock! In America death is *managed*, reduced to seven hours of gas-flame, the bones are then pulverized. Ungreen process. Cremains in a carton weigh about 10 pounds. R.I.P. John.

Sniffing lavender, I am still grieving. We will have a serious literary gathering at OCHC soon. *Poshlost*, the adjective Nabakov used for human transitorinous. What a sweet awkward sentence. Anyone who wishes to contact me through OCHC about the incredible life of John M. Gogol may do so. I am reminded of the great metaphysical poet John Donne, who gave Ernest Hemingway the epigraph for his Spanish civil war novel, *For Whom The Bell Tolls*.

“No man is an island, entire of itself.. For any man's death diminishes me because I am involved in mankind. Therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls. It tolls for thee.” Φ



John holds a rare 1920's Panamint basket – photo © 2014 Markus Shearer

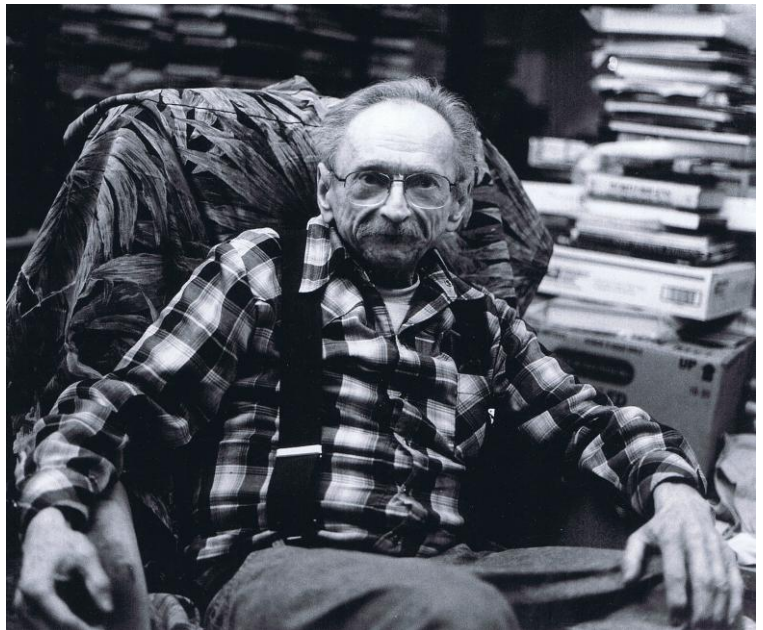
On October 31, 1985, *Willamette Week* published two articles of mine on Gogol. “Poetic Justice” and “Who is Mr. Cogito?” He is posing among his books. I called him a Polish-Russian cowboy. They are scholarly and well-edited. I was a better writer back then. Thirty years ago.

“Who is Mr. Cogito?”

When John Gogol and Robert Davies began publishing *Mr. Cogito* magazine in 1973, Gogol was already translating the work of Zbigniew Herbert, who many consider to be one of the best poets in the world. “Mr. Cogito,” a persona created by Herbert, is a dapper humanist caught up in the realities and absurdities of the modern world. He faces a strange universe with compassion, wisdom, wit and a wry philosophical élan. He speaks of Virtue as an old maid who’s growing as small as a hair in the throat or a buzzing in the ears. She’s there, though we’d like to forget her. Despite the villains of history, this Sancho Panza-Don Quixote-like figure will stay in his homeland to ask the relevant deadly questions: Why can’t the ordinary man and woman have a better life? What’s happening to my country? Both Gogol and Davies thought this Mr. Cogito would make the perfect logo for their publication.

The “voice” of Mr. Cogito is that of Herbert himself. There is no poet writing in America today who is comparable, Gogol told me. Epigrammatic lines alternate in his poems with irony and a ringing sense of justice. Despite the difficulties, the poet, like his character, has chosen to remain in Poland and write about the conditions there, which makes him a cause célèbre, a political exile in his own country.

At one point in our conversation, I decided to go after Gogol, give him a rough time. “Okay? So how do you pronounce Mr. Cogito, darn it? Isn’t it a kind of perplexingly difficult name for Americans to deal with? No wonder your small-press magazine is so little known with a name like that!” I said. He chuckled. “In Latin the accent is on the first syllable. CO gee toe. But in Polish it’s on the next-to-the-last syllable. Co GEE toe.” Gogol reassured me, “It’s pronounced several different ways.” Literally, the name means “Mr. I Think.”



“Gogol is short, slightly bowlegged, and hawk-faced.” – W.C.
photo © 2014 Markus Shearer

Oddly enough, a small chapbook by Herbert, one long poem entitled *Report From A Town Under Siege*, published in 1984 by Trace Editions of Portland. Publisher Charles Seluziki surfaced at the spring poetry festival. The amazing thing about it is that it contains an original, one-of-a-kind ink drawing done by Herbert himself. The highly depressing sketch shows a skull-like sun shining down on wistful buildings, and from the limb of a skeletal tree a body hangs. My God, if that’s Herbert’s present state of mind, how tragic!

John and Bogdana Carpenter, Herbert’s American translators, visited him last year in Poland. They said he was quite unhappy and not writing very much. Despite his unseemly disposition or mental health, I am happy to note, Herbert’s career is on the upsurge. Just the other day Gogol showed me a copy of *Report From The Besieged City* — with a title similar to that of the chapbook — translated by the Carpenters and published by Ecco Press of New York. This is a major full-length collection. A book of his essays, *The Barbarian in The Garden*, is due out this year.

Herbert himself, no doubt, is as surprised as the rest of us that Polish poets have become hot, a fad, like reggae or salsa music. What next? The Nobel Prize? Okay, I've given my spiel! If you're not interested in reading *Mr. Cogito* magazine by now, you never will be. I've introduced you to him — an important figure in contemporary world poetry. You'll recognize him by his walking cane or umbrella — whatever it is. One leg is shorter than the other from an old war wound, as he hobbles along through the forest. Still he is a wry, spry, friendly fellow, even if he has a slight Polish accent. Don't take my word for it. Discover him for yourself. Φ

“Poetic Justice” – an excerpt

Recently, I spoke with Gogol, who does some of the translations for *Mr. Cogito*, at his Southeast Portland home. We had several conversations about the fascinating international flavor of *Mr. Cogito* and the murky complexities of global politics. ... He gave up a promising academic career at Pacific University in 1974 to concentrate on the preserving and fostering of Native American arts and the promotion of translations. Today, in addition to co-publishing *Mr. Cogito*, Gogol is editor and publisher of *American Indian Basketry and Other Native Arts*, an important ethnographic magazine.



Mr. Cogito cover graphic © 1987 Tom Cassidy

Gogol, you might say, is a 46-year-old Polish-Russian cowboy. Granted, that's hardly a clear picture. He's more interested in Indian culture than cowboy stuff, despite the omnipresent tan cowboy boots. Even Indians wear them today. Gogol is short, slightly bowlegged, and hawk-faced. ...

We ended this conversation by agreeing that, unfortunately, Americans have been propagandized by their own State Department to think of the Russians as “the enemy.” The U.S.S.R. is beset by many internal problems and is hardly in a position to take over the world. He stated: “One has only to travel a little distance within the Soviet Union to see how poor a country it really is. Incompetence pervades every aspect of Soviet society. That must include the military. The Russians simply don't have the technology nor the ability to use it the way it's being used in the U.S.”

On a different occasion, Gogol enlightened me about the situation in Poland today: “Young intellectuals feel the Catholic Church is almost as conservative a force as the Communist Party. Both influences repress free thought. In Poland, different groups use the church as a wedge

against the state. The real intellectuals simply exploit its power. They would hate to see the church have any more authority than it already has.”

I asked Gogol why he thinks Polish poets are some of the best in the world. “In Poland,” he said, “great poetry arises because of the oppression. Look at the other nations of Europe — and the poetry they're producing. West Germany is a free society, and they haven't produced a great poet since Rilke. The best German poets now are from East Germany — a fairly restrictive society.”

“Are you saying that political repression is one of the factors that makes for good poetry? Maybe the most important one?” I asked. “Contemporary American poetry is boring right now,” he responded. “There's nothing exciting about it. It's like going to the supermarket and being able to satiate yourself on steaks and ice cream.” We both concluded that the self-satisfied, consumer way of life in America has created a contemporary poetry and literature filled with ennui and triviality. Φ