

SIMON PERCHIK: AN INTERVIEW

with

James R. Elkins, *Legal Studies Forum*
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Elkins: The poet David Ignatow, begins his “preface” to a collection of your poetry, *Who Can Touch These Knots*, by observing that, “Whoever first reads Simon Perchik’s poems thinks he, Simon, is having a bad dream; no two words seem to fit together, as we expect in everyday speech and as we expect in contemporary poetry”¹ If the language of the poem doesn’t “fit” and defies expectations of both speech and poetry, how are we language mortals to read your work?

Perchik: How to read the work is the essence of your question and my answer is that meaning isn’t always essential—a reader can be informed without being given a meaning. Music does that. Abstract painting does that. Dancing does that. My wife with just her posture will “tell” me it’s OK, or not OK. It’s true poetry uses words and words are supposed to have meaning but we, as lawyers, are well aware that words don’t always mean what they seem to mean. And since I work the unconscious in the reader it seems to me the only way I’m going to make it down there is to use words that will block the expected train of thought and make the reader go down into herself. Big risk, of course. But when it works, well, so much the better. But I don’t abandon the reader completely, on a certain level she should get something from the poem. I feel I have to “touch the ground” sometime so there are bits of narrative to console the reader and there will be some commonplace image they can identify.

Elkins: Some poets, I’m thinking in particular of Charles Reznikoff, was often more concerned about the recording and preservation of his poetry than he was securing a broad readership. In writing poetry as you do—in pushing the language of the poem beyond easily grasped patterned speech—are you concerned about limiting the audience for your work?

¹ David Ignatow, “Preface: On Perchik’s Poetry,” to Simon Perchik, *WHO CAN TOUCH THESE KNOTS: NEW AND SELECTED POEMS* xi-xiii, at xi (Metuchen, New Jersey: Scarecrow Press, 1985).

Perchik: I'm happy you mentioned Reznikoff. He is America's best poet, lawyer or no lawyer. As far as an audience is concerned I don't see how any poet can realistically expect an audience. Most people I know would sooner drink iodine than read a poem. My wife of over 50 years has never read a poem I've written. Jim, who beside you and me and maybe a few dozen others even cares?

Elkins: You do not title your poems. You related to David Baratier, in a 1995 interview, that: "I like to think there are a lot of facets going on, that's why they're not even titled, because I don't want to lock in the reader to a certain direction or meaning. The reader can decide which facet they want to take during each reading. Without a title the poem is left open for the reader to go whichever way they want."² You have made it clear that the reader must do some work in reading your poetry, and work they must. Yet, isn't there a difference in trying to say, either to reader or critic, this is what the poem means, and, providing no title, no glimpse of the meaning we associate with a titled place to begin?

Perchik: The answer is yes. There is a difference and the reader will soon enough learn the territory. My question is how do abstract painters escape criticism for not presenting the barn, the tree, the cow. I want my work not to have meaning but an anguish impossible of articulation. There's where the power is.

Elkins: Robert Peters, concludes his introduction to *Who Can Touch These Knots*, with the argument that in reading your poems, we readers are "somehow more complete than we were before we entered" the world of your poetry.³ Do you share with Peters the hope that in your way of using language in your poetry that you will leave the reader more complete?

Perchik: Yes. The reader is, hopefully, more complete because I try to present the commonplace in an unusual context. If I'm lucky, when I write about a doorknob you will never open another door the way you once did. Of course, it doesn't always work out but that's what I want to do for the reader—to have the reader enriched by the seemingly innocuous things around us.

² "Simon Perchik in conversation with David Baratier," Jacket No. 8 <<http://jacketmagazine.com/08/perchik-iv.html>> (last visited, November 27, 2004) (hereinafter, Interview).

³ Robert Peters, "Introduction," *supra* note 1, v-ix, at ix.

Elkins: David Ignatow claims that you are “an original.” Is that a sense you have about your own work? Is there something in the particularity of poetry, and the way it draws on inner experience, and the found image, that leaves every poet secure in the sense that his work is original?

Perchik: No I don’t consider my poetry original. I have three idols who I try to emulate and I should note that Reznikoff is not among them because I am helplessly headed to a more abstract poetry and I cannot improve on the *yiddishkeit* that empowers his work. My idols: Pablo Neruda, Paul Celan and Alexiendre. I wouldn’t mind it if someone said it’s OK to write abstract poetry and to say that my work is in that vein. Problem is, I have nothing but doubts about what I do.

Elkins: Ignatow likens your poetry to surrealist painting. He claims that you reject the analogy. Has his surrealist painting analogy grown on you over the years? Does it sound more right today than it did almost 20 years ago when Ignatow suggested it to you?

Perchik: Surrealist still sounds off. I prefer the word abstract. Even today. The problem with surrealism is that its things are not in this world. My things are. My wagons have four wheels, my people have two hands and so on. It’s the connection between real things that I deal in.

Elkins: Ignatow observes, as have I, that your poetry leaves a great deal of work for the reader to do.⁴ I am reminded here, in this notion that the heavy lifting is left for the reader, of our stance in legal education—the teacher asks questions, does not attempt to answer them, and lets the student work out his or her own understanding of the law. I wonder whether students subjected to this kind of kind education don’t feel as unsettled as does a reader of your poetry.

Ignatow, returning to his notion of your poetry as surrealist painting, finds that when we are confronted with Salvador Dalí or Max Ernst, “you are met by powerful oddities staring you in the face, challenging you to make sense of them or sense of yourself, as you absorb the work, or refuse, or are unable to absorb the work.”⁵ We learn in law, early and repeatedly, to expect “powerful oddities” which we must confront, and

⁴ “There is no hint or suggestion,” says Ignatow, “as to what is meant. That is for you to work out” *Id.* at xii.

⁵ *Id.*

in making sense of them, absorbing them or rejecting them, we begin to make sense of our own life as a student of law and as a lawyer.

Perchik: I like your choice of the word “unsettled.” When the poem is finished I want the reader to be consoled and enriched. But before then I want the reader to fear the commonplace. To be unsettled. Fear is a dominant theme. Fear and loneliness.

Elkins: There is the continuing presence of hands in your poetry. To ask what they mean would be like asking you what does poetry mean, but we can observe their presence and see what you might want to say about this repetitive offering of familiarity in the obtuse angled language of your poetry.

Perchik: I have a great story to tell you about the hands in my poetry. When my first book of poetry, *I Counted Only April*, came out, it was reviewed in *Poetry* and the reviewer commented on the hands found so frequently in the poems. Jim, I wasn't aware that I used the word! I was stunned when I realized, having it pointed out to me, how much I used a word I was not aware of using at all. Anyway, I have no idea where “hands” came from but it seems to have worked its way into the poems. The word “stone” has taken its place and though I'm fully aware of it I'm comfortable with it. I love it!

Elkins: You were a pilot during WW II. You seem to have found a way in your poetry to make a place for this time in your life. How immediate and present are those years to you now?

Perchik: Yes, I was a pilot. I was in bombers and there is no question that the war is with me day and night still. It informs and dominates my work. I can't shake it.

Elkins: I found my way to your poetry because you are, in addition to your poetry, a lawyer. Could you tell us anything about this “other” aspect of your life?

Perchik: The problem with writing, poetry or otherwise, is that if you plan to be a member of society you need to earn a living. Law was my ticket. But just as a lawyer makes a living from words, I found law compatible with other forms of writing. It's a wonder more lawyers aren't writers of poetry or prose.

Elkins: We find few poems in your various published collections which offer any indication of your life as a lawyer. What relationship, if any, is there, for you, in these two seemingly diverse enterprises, law and poetry? Or, do you find them not so diverse as we might initially tend to think them to be?

Perchik: I don't think law and poetry are so different.

Elkins: You talked in the 1995 interview with David Baratier about the poets who have influenced your poetry and you've mentioned some of your poet idols.⁶ Could you comment on other writers, philosophers, and intellectuals who may have played some part in your poetry and your thinking about the world?

Perchik: I brag to whoever will listen that I know and have known James Robinson, one of the three founders of CORE and have been witness to the almost unbelievable changes in race relations which he had a dominant role in bringing about. Knowing him makes me proud. I don't know many poets, personally or otherwise.

Elkins: Si, in your poetry, words and images appear like sharp fragments of glass, sometimes but not always, smooth rounded by the wash of words coming at us in waves. You use a language comprised of ordinary words but there is certainly nothing ordinarily about the way you compose a poem. Reading your poetry, I get a sense of being thrown into a concrete mixer and tumbled with words, and then when stepping beyond the poetry, there is a giddy sense of wobbling without the compass of linearity. And yet, there is a kind of purity in the poems. With some of the poems, I feel like I've stumbled onto a once great city which exist now in ruins. From the jumble of debris, and the collapse of conventional structure (and it's presumed logic) we have only, in your words, "some skeleton/turning the world from inside/sniffing its powerful bones/everywhere grows monstrous."⁷ In still another poem, you write:

I can't speak to you! my hands
half way to my mouth—a baby
tracing all the bells in the crib

⁶ Interview, *supra* note 2.

⁷ Lines from "The Snowcat Poems 1980-1981, To the Photographs of Robert Frank (1984)," in Simon Perchik, *WHO CAN TOUCH THESE KNOTS: NEW AND SELECTED POEMS 70* (Metuchen, New Jersey: Scarecrow Press, 1985).

finds its own mouth—my hands
can't reach, can't rescue the words⁸

In still another poem, there is a reference to "celestial dust" and "the wandering galaxies."⁹ And then these wonderful lines: "I will dream it/then, head first /fall off the world."¹⁰ And from this same poem: "—I too am warped elliptic, tightened/held toward these saw-toothed leaves/ still unraveling the world :the tree/only dust will soothe."¹¹

Do these lines, from "The Gandolf Poems" in *Who Can Touch These Knots* bear any resemblance to the standing we might accord to your poems: "Great tricks perhaps in silence/in the clearest night."¹²

Perchik: There isn't any real sense of the linear, or narrative here. Hey, what can I say.

⁸ "untitled poem," *id.* at 66.

⁹ *Id.* at 72, 71.

¹⁰ *Id.* at 72.

¹¹ *Id.* at 73.

¹² *Id.* at 85.

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