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## INTERVIEW WITH ROBERT COOPERMAN

by Fred Alsberg

**Alsberg:** What first brought you to the reading and writing of poetry?

**Cooperman:** My mother always read to me. I remember her reading Milne's "Now We Are Six," one poem about hiding behind a sofa particularly intriguing me. Funny I don't remember her reading *Winnie the Pooh*, just the other stuff. Maybe I'm confusing Milne with Stevenson's children's verses, it seems a long time ago now. I wrote "poetry" all through grade school and high school. Then in college I discovered Keats and was totally intimidated. I thought if I can't write that well why bother at all? Then I moved into an artistic neighborhood in Manhattan, painters and musicians abounded in my apartment building. It was a really heady atmosphere. I just started writing again, and talking about art with my neighbors and friends. I joke about one seminal experience: I had stayed up all night before taking a Greyhound to a cousin's wedding in Massachusetts. I'd been to a rock concert and was blindingly alert as the dawn sun hit my eyes in the bus, and I had this probably exhaustion induced revelation that I wanted to be a poet. And that was that. I still think Keats is the benchmark by which I judge every poem I read, by the way.

**Alsberg:** Does writing poetry fulfill a myriad of needs in you or primarily one or two?

**Cooperman:** I've got a fairly unique situation, I'm a house spouse. I'm lucky enough that my wife has a good enough career, which she thankfully loves when her despicable colleagues will let her love it, that I don't have to "work" in the traditional sense of the word. So my life is mostly taking care of her—secretarial stuff at home, shopping, cooking, cleaning (in a very desultory fashion)—and my own writing. And Beth has been incredibly supportive of my writing. We first met in a poetry workshop, and, after she said how horrible one of my poems was, it was love at second sight. So aside from love and its responsibilities, writing is almost everything to me. I used to joke that if I were 6'5" instead of my puny 5'7", on good days, I'd have been a professional basketball player, and if you'd seen the way I play basketball, you'd know what a big (and bad) joke that is. Maybe everyone who lives primarily in his mind and fantasies dreams of success and greatness of the body. But I realize now that was just my youthful fantasy. I've been writing seriously for 20+ years, and I still get just as big a bang when a poem surprises me in some way with its unexpected excellence. I'll still say, "Did you write that? You're pretty good."

**Alsberg:** Where do you find the subjects for your poems, and why are such subjects productive for you?

**Cooperman:** I'm drawn to the quirky, the eccentric, the twisted, the grotesque. I made a bet with someone that I could find at least one poem in any issue of any paper in the country, any in the world, if I could only read the language. He claimed any poem I wrote as a result would be inauthentic or trivial. Only deeply felt poems about deeply felt subjects need apply, he claimed. Which I think is hogwash. It's up to the poet to invest a subject with significance, by his details and diction, so that the reader believes this is of utmost importance and relevance. My second chapbook was based on an article I read in *The Atlanta Journal* about 10-12 years ago, about a teenage girl who had been what we would now call sexually abused by some priests. I created a whole bunch of voices: hers, the priests, neighbors, her father, lawyers, the judge, the verdict, her reaction to it. I thought the moral was fairly obvious.

I'm definitely a storyteller. What I look for is not my emotion to a situation, but what would a character in this situation do and how would he or she react. To me it's much too easy and silly to simply write an anti-war poem or a poem trashing Gingrich and his ilk by merely stating, "You're horrible and despicable. The interesting part is to get into the head of a toad like Gingrich and let him hang himself. Irony is definitely part of the key. Human absurdity tickles me down to the bone. I'm also drawn to the far away and the long ago. When I was in grad school I taught a survey course in World Lit, and the first book on the syllabus was *The Odyssey*. Partly because I'd taught it for something like three quarters in a row and partly because I loved it and partly because I was going through my one bout of writer's block, I wrote a book-length sequence of dramatic monologues based on the characters and situations in it and in *The Iliad*. But what draws me most to a subject is its potential to yield a story. I'll write about my own life and the lives of my family and friends, but I see no point in airing dirty linen. I don't care how unhappy you were as a child because of abusive parents, and I don't expect you to be interested in my unhappiness either. That's for me and my wife and my pillow in the dark night of my own soul. However, a story about a relative who was reputed to be an art forger, now that I find interesting. Or my maternal grandfather, who fought part of two professional bouts and was dragged from the ring by his ear by his mother, I find that interesting. Or my father who was the one Jew in his company at Fort Bragg in the last days of World War II and had to box an anti-Semitic sergeant to prove his honor and right to exist as a human being, that I find interesting and instructive. What I'm trying to say at too great a length is that I'm not a confessional poet.

Again, Keats is my model here, in our desire to be chameleon poets, to change into the skin of any creature we write about. I'm not sure he was successful at that ambition, his lyric poetry being so overwhelmingly gorgeous and poignant, and he didn't live to write with a Shakespearean objectivity, but that's the direction he wanted to take, if he only had the time.

**Alsberg:** How do you decide where to break the lines in your poems?

**Cooperman:** I always try to break a line on an important word, to have the last word of any given line be one that the reader will remember, one that will lead into the next line, the next thought. I've tried formal verse, with indifferent success, but did collect them all into a manuscript that's now making the rounds with, I fear, even less success than any I experienced in the writing of them. I had an argument with a colleague once, when I taught in Denver, about a story by Catherine Anne Porter, "The Grave," I think it was. He rhapsodized, "It's poetry," to which I replied with my usual pre-coffee acid, "Yeah, almost," to which he replied, "Oh, I suppose you think Alexander Pope is poetry?" to which I replied, "You bet, and then some." One thing about poetry: it's got to read better than even the best prose, whether through concision or psychological insight or just the skill and ear of the poet. And one way to achieve that effect is through the line. Also, the first line of a poem will almost always determine how the rest of them will go, what length they will be. It seems to me, in my own poetry, if I start off with a short first line, it's inelegant to jump back and forth between long and short lines. Of course, subject matter will also play a role in determining line length and breaks. I once wrote a triptych of poems based on *The Merchant of Venice*. Shylock spoke in long, bitter complaining lines; Antonio in iambic pentameter rhymed stanzas, and the guy who gets Shylock's daughter (God my mind is going!) in short, staccato lines, indicating he's not the brightest of the three, and also his mind is in the gutter and into his father-in-law's pockets.

**Alsberg:** Have you ever written or considered writing a long poem (hundreds of lines)? What are the pitfalls and attractions of long poems?

**Cooperman:** A long poem is intriguing. I'm envious, in awe of poets like Homer, Milton, Crane, even Edward Young's *Night Thoughts*. I'd consider Andrew Hudgin's *After the Lost War* a glorious example of a long poem, though it's divided up into many poems. In a way, I consider some of my manuscripts to be long poems, divided into many monologues. *The Badman and the Lady*, my second full-length book, I consider a single poem, from many points of view. Actually, I consider it a sort of lazy man's novel, but that's another story.

Part of the problem, though, with a purely long poem is just a reader's attention span. Are you going to break it up into cantos, or sections, and give the reader a break and a breath? Or just fling the whole thing at him and hope for the best, or if you've got a lot of confidence, assume he or she will of course make the effort and leap of faith to read all of it? Another problem with a long poem is that it can't, as far as I can see, be a meditative poem. It has to be a lazy man's novel, with plot, characters, setting, plus that panache of language that prose, even "poetic" prose can't supply, plus a sense of why lines are broken where they're broken. It has to be a narrative, not a lyric. From what I can tell there has been just one successful lyric epic in the language, Wordsworth's *The Prelude*, and what we remember most and best about that poem is the boat stealing incident, the narrative, not the contemplative, philosophical sections.

**Cooperman:** The attraction of a long poem is partly to be able to say I did it. Keats doggedly slogged on through *Endymion*, knowing it stunk, just to say he finished writing a long poem as a kind of apprentice work before he could get onto his real work. It's also a test of imagination and invention to be able to keep your own interest going that long. And of course there's the purely practical problem of will anyone read it, will anyone want to publish it? You see so many journals advertise, "nothing longer than a page." And I confess when I see a really long poem, I'm tempted not to read it simply because it is so long.

**Alsberg:** Does skillful use of so-called free verse require a knowledge of formal technique, or are the two so dissimilar that such knowledge is not needed?

**Cooperman:** There was a Picasso exhibit that took over the entire Museum of Modern Art in New York about 15 years ago. My wife, mother, and I took it in and came out reeling from the sheer volume of canvases. But what I recall most about it was his magnificent *Guernica* and the various studies he did of some of the figures in it before committing them to the final canvas. He drew the bull from a number of different angles, the same for the horse, even some of the less figurative figures. What I'm trying to say is that while some of the objects in that mammoth painting existed only in Picasso's imagination, he had to practice and experiment before he was willing to put them down on canvas for a final, definitive time. I think there's a similar relationship between free and formal verse. You can't run (and I'm not calling free verse running) before you can crawl and walk (and I'd never call formal verse walking or crawling or even just an experiment or apprentice work). But it seems to me that it behooves us as poets to learn the rudiments of our craft, to learn and appreciate our elders and betters, before we launch into our own work. It really irks me that lots of people

in grad school poetry workshops have no idea about the greats of English poetry. You ask them about Chaucer, Milton, Shakespeare, Spenser, and either you get a blank look or a sneer, that these poets are somehow no longer relevant. Piffle! Poetry did not begin with T.S. Eliot. He'd be the first to admit he stood on the shoulders of giants. Where do you think he got the monologue idea for Prufrock from? Browning. And where did Browning get the idea for the monologue? From Shakespeare's soliloquies and Donne's persona poems. I hate it when people claim good free verse is harder to write than good formal verse. They're either fools or liars, and have obviously never tried to write formal verse themselves. You always hear about rock musicians (Phil Lesh of my dearly departed Grateful Dead comes to mind) who extol their classical training, saying it frees them to be able to improvise. If it's good enough for Phil, it should be good enough for us poets. How can a grounding in rhyme and meter be bad for you as a poet?

**Alsberg:** Generally speaking is figurative language overused in American poetry today?

**Cooperman:** Absolutely not. If anything, I see far too much slackness (in my own work and in others) passing itself off for poetry without paying attention to making our poems come alive with imaginative comparisons. We spew words out, thinking to replace our duty of making the reader see with a witty (usually only half so) or arch observation, or a weird yoking of two words. It particularly irks me to see words like "impossible" begin a phrase that will substitute for an image. Poems that contain easy verbal formulations like that one are just plain lazy. What may be overused about figurative language is the forgetting to build images into one coherent and powerful whole. I read a scathing review of a famous first collection, I can't remember where and won't name names, but the reviewer took umbrage that the images went nowhere, didn't build one upon another.

**Alsberg:** What is the place or stature of the love poem in the 90's?

**Cooperman:** There's nothing like a good love poem. Call me an old softy and accuse me of being a hypocrite, in light of everything I said above about lyrical poetry, but I love love poems. Of course, it's really hard to write a really good one, and how many different ways can you say, "I love you?" But that's the challenge, and poetry is about challenges. Of course there's so many aspects of love: first love, lost love, unrequited love, mature love, missing a spouse who's away, the fear of losing a lover through death, the companionship that comes with many years, the better-than-any drug-zoom-in-the-veins of the first ten days of being in love,

adulterous love, you name it. A professor used to joke there are only two subjects to write about: sex and death. Well, substitute love for sex, or add it to sex, or see sex as a part of love, or vice versa, and you've got just about the whole spectrum covered.

**Alsberg:** What contemporary poets would you classify as required reading for today's aspiring poets? Why?

**Cooperman:** Richard Wilbur has always been one of my heroes, for his formal brilliance, his understated imagery. I admire Galway Kinnell greatly, especially his later work, his tender lyricism and quiet eloquence. I thought Anthony Hecht's *The Hard Hours* was one of the finest books I've ever read. I'd read anything that Brendan Galvin wrote, partly because of his endless curiosity in such book-length poems as *Saints in Their Ox-Hide Boats* and *Wanganuog Traveler*. The same almost goes for Linda Pastan, though she seemed to write about the same things over and over, though wonderfully well. Philip Levine's a must read for the way he has apotheosized the working man. His *What Work Is* was simply incredible. I love Ai, for her wicked monologues and twisting of contemporary politics. I love the quiet formal excellence of Miller Williams' later collections. And I'm drawn to the monologue poems of Robert Pack. As a matter of fact, I just read *Faces in a Single Tree* and thought, here's a worthy successor to Frost in the way he depicted the New England "soul." I think JRosellen Brown's Cory Fry collections are must reading, the way she gets into character with a novelist's sensitivity, and the quiet poignance of her language. I'm a great admirer of the Welsh poet and physician Dannie Abse, especially his earlier work. Being a medical doctor seems to have given him a subject and a good dose of humility, not that his poems have anything to be humble about. I greatly admire the wildness of Stephen Dobyns' poetry. I think Daniel Mark Epstein is a must read. And I love Hilary Tham, the way her poetry straddles two cultures, and her absolutely devilish sense of irony and the incongruities of life and her refusal to sentimentalize anything. Talk about love poetry, she wrote a great love poem, "Tigerbone Wine," funny and tender all at once. And last but not least is Robert Lietz, who writes with the most luscious pen of anyone I know. I guess what draws me to all of these poets is that they combine verbal excellence with attention to detail and to character. They know the human heart and portray it in lovely language.