

## HoboEye Interview with Simon Perchik

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### Simon Perchik: A Poet of Abstraction

*by Mitchell McInnis*

For nearly 60 years, Simon Perchik has been writing and publishing poems. Abstraction is central to his project as a poet, and he is dogged in his pursuit of the distinction between poetry and prose. I say dogged because Perchik is not merely convinced of the distinction, he is perturbed by how much of contemporary poetry is what he describes as differently organized prose. And while he counts poets like Pablo Neruda and Charles Reznikoff as heroes—both of whom employed narrative elements in their poetry—Perchik systematically avoids such elements in his own work.

Perchik describes the import of his poems artfully, comparing it to the way a listener reacts to Mahler's music, or to a Rothko painting. His goal as a poet, he says, is similar to that of Rothko's accomplishment as a painter. Perchik's readers are liberated from meaning and narrative the same way that Rothko's viewers are liberated from subject matter. In that abstraction, that confounding of rationality, emotions rise as the synthesis of an artist's dialectic.

Corresponding with Perchik, I was reminded of a line from U.S. Poet Laureate Charles Simic: "The most original achievement of American literature is the absence of an official literary language." Like Simic, Perchik occupies a unique place in American poetry, one that is a carefully crafted blend of European and American traditions, one that both absorbs and

challenges those traditions. Perchik is also indicative of the rich diversity within American poetry. As Lawrence Ferlinghetti wrote, "There are no doubt as many definitions of poetry as there are poems."

This interview is the result of my correspondence with Perchik. To find out more about Perchik, visit his website: [www.geocities.com/simonthepoet](http://www.geocities.com/simonthepoet)

***McInnis:*** *My first question comes from reading interviews you've given in the past. In one of them, the poet David Ignatow was quoted. He compared your poetry to that of a painter in the surrealist mode. In another interview, you said that "meaning isn't always essential" when reading your poetry. Can you talk a bit about how these two statements relate to the style you've crafted so carefully over the years?*

**Perchik:** The issue of rationality in poetry is easily resolved in my mind. Meaning, to me, seems the place where prose does its work exclusively. To me, poetry is the use of language to inform the reader of what cannot be articulated. A place where a person is exposed to words that tell him/her nothing yet provoke an emotion incapable of explication. That's where the power to heal is. For instance, I tell you your mother died. You begin to cry. I ask you why you're crying and you say, well, you just told me my mother died. Makes sense but if you are listening to Mahler and you suddenly begin to cry and I ask you why you're crying you have to say, "I don't know." How much more powerful is Mahler's music than a declarative sentence. Same with poetry. There should be nothing on the page to which the reader can point to and say this is why I'm crying. Spooky? And how! There's a world of difference between poetry and prose. And it's the duty of poets to offer the healing power of emotion without dumping an

ineffective declarative "all life's a bitch" into the lap of the reader. To restore the reader without the reader knowing why he/she is healed is the benchmark of poetry. This is not to say poetry is better than prose. It's that they are two different tools for two different jobs. Poetry may have all the mystery and curative powers but it takes prose to tell you that.

**McInnis:** *That gets at some important distinctions right away, and your points are well taken. Of course, meaning and narrative have a rich and vast tradition in lyric poetry, but poetry has many traditions. Your notion of poetry's "power to heal" is a very interesting one. Ever since the Gallery 6 reading fifty-two years ago, confessional poets (or "Howlers" as Harold Bloom likes to deride them) have introduced more and more invective to American poetry. Does this type of invective stymie the relationship you're discussing? If the poet is focused on howling out his or her own anger in the name of some catharsis, does it prevent healing the reader in favor of healing the poet?*

**Perchik:** Glad you brought that up. The duty of poets is to heal others. If anything gets in the way of that the poet has not done the job. That poetry is to heal others is obvious at funerals where you read out loud the poetry of John Donne and not the prose of Dostoyevsky. Of course there is the rapture which the poet, or any artist, enjoys when the work is finished. Maybe while it's in progress. But if the work, when finished, is solely to benefit the artist there is no way he/she can be said to have done the job. Having said that we must acknowledge that we are all pretty much alike. If a poet writes about his/her loneliness and loss all readers can certainly relate to that. And too, if the poet has so distanced his/her persona from loneliness and loss then the work loses credibility. The most important test of a

good poem, to me at least, is to have the feeling that the poet had to write that poem. If I feel the poet just went through the motions then I ask myself why should I get excited. I assume if the poem did not help heal the reader there would be no validation which the poet surely wants. Publication is all about validation. If, as you stated, the poet "is focused on howling out his or her own anger" you would never read that poem: He/she would have no need to submit it for publication. Bloom may not like the craftsmanship of his "Howlers" but he should acknowledge that the confessional poets meet at least the first test of poetry: to be on fire. And if they don't heal others the publishing world will resolve that issue.

**McInnis:** *That makes a lot of sense. To flesh out some of these notions, let's talk about a poet we both admire—Charles Reznikoff. Reznikoff was certainly one of those poets who had to write the poems he did. He set to the business of working during the day and writing during the night in a yeoman-like fashion. In his wonderful essay "The Decisive Moment," Paul Auster described Reznikoff's work as 'less a mode of expressing the world than it is a way of being in the world.' The concept of the poet as perceiver is evident in Reznikoff's work. How has his work informed your own project as a poet?*

**Perchik:** I wish Reznikoff's poetry was more of an influence on my work. But I know my limitations and so didn't go down that road. What I wound up doing is using the same procedure to write poems as did in solving legal problems. With law the problem arrives by itself. Client comes to you, gives you a set of facts and asks what can be done. But with poetry I had to create the problem. I did this by confronting two disparate, contradictory ideas and then set about resolving them. Instead of a legal brief it was a poem. Reznikoff, though a lawyer, separated the making of law

and the making of poetry. Also, by nature, I am a bit of a wild cannon and am disturbed that painters can abstract their ideas or scenes but not so for poets. So I wanted to give it a shot. And I liked it so went along that road. With Reznikoff there is no confusion, no chance of misunderstanding. I wanted confusion and misunderstanding. I also wanted the resolution up in the air, not laid out in the reader's lap. What ever idea readers got from the poem I wanted them to think they came by it without any help from the poem. Of course, working the subconscious is what Reznikoff did too. But he did it head on. I come in the back way. What happened is that Neruda became my idol. Vincente Alexiandre too. Also, a poet from Portugal named Roberto Helder. All 180 degrees from Reznikoff. But let's face it. If you want sheer joy, need to be calmed, to be enriched you have to look hard to find anyone more capable of filling that need than Reznikoff. One last word about discipline burned into people who make their living by going to an office every day. I really didn't do much writing till I retired in 1980. But at that time I found it absolutely essential that I be at a table in the local coffee shop at 9 am and start to write. Whether I wanted to or felt like it or not. I just sat there and moved the pen across the page (describing photographs, taking notes from a book on myths or biology) and like Reznikoff said to myself I'm either a writer or not. The poems don't come by themselves. Mitch, it's been my MO for 25 years of 52 weeks a year of 5, 6 day weeks of 3, 4 hour days. I just exploded. Except for the last 3 years (my wife is suffering from shingles) I've been writing at home on the kitchen table. Like the joke goes, "I wish I were dead, I could use the rest."

***McInnis:*** *There's a fascinating tension between two of your statements. In your interview with James Elkins, you said 'Most people I know would sooner drink iodine*

*than read a poem.' At the same time, you believe in the healing power of poetry, and it's only natural to want to spread the medicine, to get it to as many readers as possible. How do you ameliorate the two? Or do you?*

**Perchik:** Glad you picked up on the contradiction. But this one is easy to explain. The people (clients and other lawyers) I dealt with in practicing law were sharks in human form; clients who wanted a problem resolved and wanted me to spend 110% of my time on the solution. And lawyers who also were suspicious of lawyers (or anyone) not absorbed in lawyer work. This is not a world of people falling apart from grief. They survive on giving grief. The image of a poet, let's face it, is that of an effeminate wimp unconnected to the comings and goings in the real world and no fight to deal with it. None of my clients knew I wrote poetry and I certainly wouldn't tell them I did. These are the people/sharks I knew and lived with. The relationship between lawyer and client is such that anything distracting from solving the legal problem is something the client doesn't want. Hope that clears up the contradiction but I also hope it doesn't stop you from looking for more contradictions. I'm sure I have and will contradict myself and by having it brought to my attention you will help me discover who I am and what it is I do. I have nothing but doubts about both.

**McInnis:** *Interesting, Si, and I certainly understand the double-life sometimes necessary to pursue the craft of poetry. That reminds me of Reznikoff's poem "Te Deum": "Not for victory/ But for the day's work done/ As well as I was able;/ Not for a seat upon the dais/ But at the common table." The poetry comes out of that solitude, and I believe the best poetry comes out of that solitude. At the same time, a poet has to pursue an audience. Since retiring from the law, has your approach changed*

*at all? That's to say, have you sought out more audiences and fellow poets with the thought of finding some community?*

**Perchik:** Yes, since retiring I did seek more of an audience. Which translated means validation. Which means publication. I got a directory of small magazines and sent out submissions 4 times a year. I had the time to. Also, on retirement I began to write like a mad man. Just couldn't stop. So I had a lot of poems to send out. But I must admit I haven't socialized as much as I could. I don't make friends easily and anyway I was writing day and night for the first 10, 12 years after I retired. And too, with age, I find myself not going to 3 openings a night. I just don't have the strength to wheel and deal. I have to do it all by mail. I do have a few close friends, 3 to be exact and one died not too long ago, Jim Weil. He and Ed Butscher and Anselm Parlatore are the 3 guys who were there in the beginning and, except for Jim, here at the end. All my books are dedicated to them. Even Rafts which should be out this month is dedicated to them. As for readership, I don't think too much about that. I think my validation comes from the editor taking the poem. I almost assume no one else will read it. I still don't seek out community. Most poets, like most artists, are not the easiest to be around. And that includes myself. But I do seek out publication. Maybe that's my audience but I doubt it. Except for a rare now and then I get almost no feed back from readers. It doesn't phase me. I just keep writing.

**McInnis:** *It's so true, isn't it... what you're saying about artists and poets being "not the easiest" to be around. It's most evident to me at those strange organisms known as book festivals. They tend to be in conference spaces that were used the week before, and will be used the week following, for business conferences. Invariably, my*

*wife and I chuckle over the central irony. Here are a host of characters, all of whom do their best work alone, compelled to gather in some impromptu community. It makes for strange dynamics. But I guess that goes back to the idea of solitude being essential to the work.*

*At the same time, I think we agree that enduring friendships are essential. Like the example of Nietzsche's Zarathustra spending too much time on the mountain top... after a while, you end up talking to your animals a little too much, and that's not so good. I mean this humorously, of course... well, mostly.*

*You mentioned your upcoming book "Rafts" in the context of your three best friends. Seems like there might be a connection there. Is there?*

**Perchik:** Yes, there is a connection between Ed, Jim, Anselm and me. They were and are my lifeline. In the 60s no one was there except Jim Weil. Without him I doubt if I would have made the effort to learn this business. He alone was there in the beginning. Anselm, who is a physician/psychiatrist who practiced in Suffolk County (where I live and that's how we met and renewed our friendship) in Southampton, the next town over. He was the editor of a magazine whose name I have forgotten for now but he ran it while at medical school. He took my work and so when he moved out this way the connection was already made, just strengthened. He started up a magazine called Bluefish which was published from Southampton. He pretty much devoted one entire issue to my work. I referred to it as "The Simon Perchik Memorial Issue". Only I didn't die right after it came out. With Ed, I met him quite by accident. He, incidentally, wrote the first Sylvia Plath biography. He is working on volume II of a Conrad Aiken biography for Univ. of Georgia Press. Anyway, I had given a copy

of one of my books that Jim Weil (He was the publisher of Elizabeth Review and ran the Elizabeth Press) published to a friend, David Myers, who incidentally, is a very good writer but I no longer am friends with. But that's another story. When Ed was visiting David he happened to pick up that copy. From then on we became close friends. He even lets me win at chess once in a while. Ed and Anselm are both good poets and friends of each other and that makes it easier.

***McInnis:*** *Given your carefulness as a poet, your careful attendance to craft and diligence in developing a unique style, you must have some specific thoughts on your legacy as a poet. I know you're a humble fellow, so you may or may not think consciously in these terms; if not, please humor me. What unites your work from 1949 to today? That is to say, what does your significant body of work contribute to the ongoing voice of poetry?*

**Perchik:** I truly believe the only contribution I might get some credit for is my conscious effort to distinguish prose from poetry. I would like to see narrative poetry moved more to the prose end of the literary spectrum. The two seem to have blurred together with the only difference being the white margins on each page of poetry and the paragraphs on each page of prose: the words could be identical and be called poetry or prose depending on how it was laid out on the page. In that effort I have gradually, over the years, more and more stressed the abstract and minimized (hopefully to extinction) the narrative. Just as modern paintings move the viewer with abstraction, I try to accomplish the same for readers of poetry: the use of abstraction.