THE OTHER ROOM
INTERVIEW SERIES
RON PADGETT

This interview with Ron Padgett was conducted via email in November 2009 by James Davies and Tom Jenks. Questions are italicised. The initials preceding each question indicate who asked it. The Other Room would like to thank Ron for his time, attention and engagement.

TJ: You are often referred to as a poet of the New York School. Could you define for us what the New York School is and your own relationship with it?

No, I can't define it. I can say that poets Frank O'Hara, Kenneth Koch, John Ashbery, James Schuyler, and others are said to be "members" of this school. For a long time I've loved their poetry and been inspired by it. Also, I've been lucky to have had them as friends.

JD: My first outing into the New York School was a discovery of your excellent An Anthology of New York Poets *in a charity shop. Did you and David Shapiro deliberate with calling it* An Anthology of New York School Poets*? The people who excited me the most in the anthology are Clark Coolidge and Aram Saroyan. Are they connected to O'Hara, Koch, Ashbery and Schuyler in any other way than being New York poets?*

It's the charity shop that is excellent. But to answer your questions. David and I never considered calling it *An Anthology of New York School Poets*, since some of the poets, such as Ed Sanders and Aram Saroyan, did not fit inside that term. David and I wanted to present a collection of contemporary poets whose work we liked, work that showed a certain affinity and yet covered a fairly wide aesthetic range. For example, it's a bit of a distance from John Ashbery to Clark Coolidge, and yet one might see the relationship between them--wit, a love of the properties of words, and allusiveness, for example--if they were neighbours in an anthology.

TJ: Once, when asked by some fifth grade students to name a favourite poem, you chose "A Step Away from Them" by Frank O'Hara. One of the reasons you gave is that it has a cheeseburger in it. Why is it important to have cheeseburgers in poems?

Of course it isn't important to have cheeseburgers in poems. My response to their question was tailored for them. I wanted them to know that poetry is big enough to have anything in it, even--or especially--the minutiae of their everyday lives. This notion is commonplace among contemporary poets, but I wasn't sure it was commonplace among ten-year-old children. By the way, I was also hoping that these New York kids would be especially attracted to a poem set in their home town.

JD: Yes I think you're right, children are unaware that poetry can be about anything. What they're more unaware of in my opinion is the infinite forms poetry can be written in and the freedom of the genre. Following on from this I was interested in talking about your collaboration with Clark Coolidge, Supernatural Overtones. *Would you explain the process and intention of writing that poem? And also whether you think it and other 'innovative' poems would inspire children more than what's on the syllabus in the States. In my experience children cope with understanding the popular poetry of the day they're taught in school but are left cold by the form and since in many cases they feel they have nothing to write about are thus left alienated from and uninspired by poetry completely.*

I think children are sometimes alienated from poetry because often the poetry they are given has little or nothing to do with their own interests. Who could blame them for such a sensible reaction? Anyway, when it comes to making a connection between a child and a poem, matters such as traditionalist vs. modernist and formal verse vs. free verse are not relevant. Yes, some so-called innovative poems appeal to kids, but I think that *Supernatural Overtones* would simply baffle them. That collaboration originated in a conversation I had with Clark some years ago. In talking about the relation between photos and their captions, we started goofing around: How about switching captions? How about using a photo as a caption for another photo? How about using a caption as a caption of a caption? This last idea seemed so nutty we decided to try it. Subsequently Clark wrote the words to go inside the boxes (where photos or illustrations usually are) and I wrote the captions. Then we paired up our words, pretty much by chance. The result is oddly hilarious. I still laugh when I read it. We performed the piece for an audience once, and everyone cracked up. By the way, the work is available online for viewing and free downloading at http://english.utah.edu/eclipse/projects/SUPERNATURAL/supernatural.html.

JD: That's interesting. I love the work. I thought it might have been one poet writing the caption and then the other seeing it and writing the words in the text boxes as a response. And then that this might happen vice versa. In any case it was just the idea of using unusual forms or interactive forms I was thinking about with school children, especially older children who have chosen to study English. I think with the

explanation you've given of the poem they could get it (the idea at least) and collaborate in a similar way after having found it exciting. Did you ever try or think about switching roles in the project?

Yes, older kids interested in writing or word play could have fun with it. After all, it's a variation of the surrealists' exquisite corpse procedure, which before them was a 19th-century parlor game. Clark and I didn't have to wait to respond to each other's writing: we knew each other's work so well that we were able to respond, as it were, in advance. I did think, for about one second, about switching roles, at the outset, but I didn't think the project would work well in that arrangement.

TJ: Continuing this exploration of your previous work, I'd like to ask you about two individual poems in particular: firstly "Haiku" and secondly "Nothing in that Drawer". Both poems subvert an established poetic form whilst simultaneously strictly adhering to it: the haiku form in the first case, the sonnet form in the second. There has been a lot written about both poems but I'd be interested in your take on them. Was your intention to show how traditional forms could be revitalised, illustrate the restrictive nature of traditional forms, a combination of the two or something else entirely?

I once said jokingly that in writing "Haiku" I had hoped the kill the haiku form. Mainly, though, I guess I wanted to make fun of the syllable counting that some people insisted on even though, I'm told, our concept of the syllable is different from that of the Japanese. The whole question is minute, one that would interest only literary specialists. Meanwhile the haiku tradition has continued to move along undisturbed by hairsplitting. The best haiku really are marvellous. Likewise the sonnet. Around the time I wrote "Nothing in That Drawer" I was thinking about the sonnets that my friend Ted Berrigan had been writing and about the repetitions in Gertrude Stein and Andy Warhol, and how a repeated word or phrase sounds different from the previous one. Perhaps my "sonnet" was more of an anti-sonnet, with a tinge of the concrete poem about it; that is, the poem itself looks something like a chest of drawers, each line being a different drawer. I'm not sure that was my conscious intention. In any case, I didn't have the grand aim of revitalizing a traditional form or

criticizing the restrictions of form, two ambitions that would have seemed to me, even back then, rather ridiculous and self-important.

JD: You've covered a lot of styles in your poetry, and I presume you don't have manifesto of DOs, but do you have any DON'Ts for writing poetry?

I've never written down such a list. There a lot of ways to write a bad poem and even more to write a mediocre one. Kenneth Koch has some interesting things to say on this subject, in his poem "The Art of Poetry." My hope is that I don't pay so much attention to the semi-conscious Don't list I carry around in my head that I lose the courage to ignore it and even to defy it. I've always liked what Frank O'Hara boiled it all down to: "You just go on your nerve." So my ultimate Don't? Don't worry about it.

TJ: Speaking of 'don'ts' one thing you don't seem to be afraid of is using humour in your work. This certainly isn't the case with a lot of poets, maybe because of ideas about poetry being a 'serious' art form, maybe because they just don't know any good jokes. For me, there is an element of crossover between the poet and the comedian: poetry at its best can be as funny and liberating as comedy and comedy at its best can be as linguistically, sonically and philosophically interesting as poetry. Someone like Lenny Bruce springs to mind here. Who are your favourite comedians?

Shakespeare, in *Midsummer Night's Dream*—if I may stretch the definition of comedian—Aristophanes, *Gammer Gurton's Needle*, Ben Jonson, Pope, Jarry, Max Jacob, to name a few. But you mean stand-up comedians, right? My grandfather Noah was a very good teller of funny stories. Among the professional comedians I liked in my childhood, after we got our first television set around 1951, were Sid Caesar, Imogene Coca, Milton Berle, Jack Benny, and Red Skelton. Before that I was a big fan of any kind of comic film—with Bob Hope, the Marx Brothers, the Three Stooges, Jerry Lewis—the list would be long. In the late 1950s, as an adolescent, I took a fancy to offbeat, intellectual comedians such as Lord Buckley, Shelley Berman, and Mort Sahl, but I never thought Lenny Bruce was very funny, though maybe he was in live performance. Alas, I learned about the Goon Squad rather late, when I was 27. Anyway, by the time I met Kenneth Koch (in 1960), I had amassed quite an inventory of comic routines and moments in my head, but it took Kenneth to

show me that it was okay to allow wit into my writing. By the way, I think he was the best comic poet of the 20th century, though of course his poetry should not be imprisoned in that category.

JD: A lot of the poetry I like the most is very funny but it's read by hardly anyone and probably nobody who doesn't write themselves. I guess a lot of the humour is self referential and thus is not accessible by a large body of people but some of it seems incredibly accessible. Thinking of Supernatural Overtones *again...your captions below CC's 'photos' have the kind of accessible humour of popular surreal comedy like say The Pythons. In one of many funny examples I could have chosen your caption reads: 'An Army rocket, returning from Venus, crashes into the sea, and a sealed container rescued from it contains a figurine depicting Einstein... Marvin Einstein.' Lots of people would get that if delivered as a joke coming from a stand-up comedian but nobody would get the CC poem as a stand-up routine or on the page, which to me is just as funny and off-beat (together they make the mind do all sorts of marvellous things):*

sparkling from with
do not with

what matter with
only is what

Supernatual Overtones seems to share some of the humour of a few popular comedians I like and certainly the humour of most contemporary artists from the 60s onwards: Robert Morris, Bas Jan Ader and Bruce Nauman spring to mind. This all leads me onto my questions. Why is contemporary poetry so unpopular? Is visual humour in contemporary art easier to get than in contemporary poetry or does it have something to do with our literary and art educations, and writing of canons?

I'm not sure that contemporary poetry *is* unpopular. On the basis of sheer numbers, it seems to be booming, in the U.S., at least. But visual humor has always seemed to me to be more accessible and immediate than verbal humor. The so-called canons might

have a little something to do with it, perhaps more in Britain than in the U.S., where some of the canons have gotten so rusty they don't work anymore.

JD: Maybe it is becoming more popular. I was using the term contemporary in the sense of innovative poetry, not of current poetry by the way. I feel that innovative writing is invisible outside of an innovative circle whereas innovative art which has become the mainstream is very much visible.

The word *innovative* might have different nuances in the two fields. Regardless, in poetry one is (usually) dealing with words, which have meanings, which, in innovative work, is sometimes confounded or disrupted, whereas in visual art the materials and the things they depict don't have any meanings. Like a tree: it doesn't mean anything, it's just itself. So the image of a tree, even one in a surrealist context, is easier to "get" than, say, a phrase such as "flump tree viz." But I don't know. I usually don't think about things such as whether or not innovative poetry is doing well vs. innovative visual art. Such a matter belongs in the domain of cultural commentary, an area of thinking that's never helped me to write poetry.

TJ: You were born in 1942 and began writing at the age of 13. Simple arithmetic tells me that this gives you over half a century of experience under your belt. In a recent poem, you seem to suggest that over time your attitude to what you do and how you do it has changed:

> *Now I write with words*
> *that never were mine nor will*
> *they ever be. A demon inside*
> *says I do not write at all.*

To finish the interview, could you give us your thoughts on the writing process?

The question is too large and too general. The answer would be book-length, a book I will never write, thank god.

TJ: OK - badly phrased. Could I just clarify the question? What I was trying to ask is how writing happens for you. Is it something you do constantly or sporadically? Do you tend to finish pieces quickly or work on them for a long time? And has the way you work changed over time?

I'm afraid my answers to these questions will be hopelessly humdrum. But to try: I write sporadically. The idea of writing constantly—what a nightmare! Some pieces I finish on the spot, short pieces, that is. The longer ones tend to take—you guessed it—longer. However, some short pieces take quite a long time. I am still revising things I wrote (and never published) as long as 25 years ago. Which segues into your final question of how my work has changed over time. For me it's odd and interesting to revise something I wrote a quarter of a century ago, when I was at least partly a different person. Not only have I changed, but the work itself has changed, without my altering a single word, because the work seems different every time I look at it. (Recently I re-read a book I had loved in my adolescence. Now it seems terrible.) But what you're really asking is how would I describe the differences, whatever type they might be. The truth is I wouldn't describe them. That's the domain of the critic. I will say that I don't think I write any better or worse, but that I do write things I couldn't have written before, simply because I'm older and I've had new experiences (for example, I have a grandson now) and new feelings (for example, I'm less afraid of dying). So I'm not the same. But isn't this true of everyone? (I told you this would be humdrum.)

The Other Room is organised by James Davies, Tom Jenks and Scott Thurston.

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