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INTERVIEW WITH ROGER CRAIK

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Roger Craik is Emeritus Professor of English at Kent University, Ashtabula (USA) and a well-known poet. His poetry books *I Simply Stared* (2002), *Rhinoceros in Clumber Park* (2003), *The Darkening Green* (2004), *Those Years* (2007), *Of England Still*, 2009, *Down Stranger Roads* (2014) are known in many countries of the world. Many poems are also published in the journals *The Formalist*, *Fulcrum*, *The Literary Review*, *The Atlanta Review* and *The Mississippi Review*. Craik's books *Those Years* and *Of England Still* are translated into Bulgarian and some poems are translated into Belarusian.

Roger Craik is one of the influential representatives of the contemporary literary process. His poetry is characterized by a diversity of themes, topics and problems related to human existence, cultural and historical memory and immigration. His philosophical and metaphorical mind has a strong expressive force which produces powerful, vivid, colorful and unforgettable images and creates a paradoxical reflection of reality. The description of common things includes a high degree of philosophical abstraction. The real and the imaginary, the common and the universal, facts and fantasy are combined in Craik's original works which reveal a specific atmosphere and an unusual richness of meanings. Craik's poetry has a strong emotional influence and evokes in readers responsive feelings.

L.P. Roger, in our rapidly developed globalized world creative power of a personality is becoming increasingly important. What is creativity for you? How important is it to you?

R.C. I'm glad you phrase the question as you do, in terms of creativity being important in a world where the individual seems to possess less and less. For me, in my small part, creativity matters because it is something that is entirely mine. I think William Stafford said something like that. It doesn't matter if it's good or not: what matters is that you made it.

I'm not very good at talking personally about how I work, precisely because it is private. But I do think that making something is a very important act, and also a very healthy one. When a poem is speaking to me (and that is how it feels – not that I am writing a poem but that a poem is speaking itself to me on its own accord) I find myself thinking lots of things that surprise me, and I become strangely interested in myself. Now that sounds very unhealthy thing to say, but I think it is healthy when it's a question of creating. It is wonderful! Put another way, there is none of the dilution that is so much a part of daily life nowadays. I mean the continual bombardment of the media, the compulsive (and pointless) checking of one's email etc.

One becomes completely absorbed in, becomes a part of, one's subject, and one sees it in interesting ways. May I say a word or two about the subjects of poetry? People seem to think that some subjects are more important than others. But I can't think that. I think that what matters is the interaction between a subject and the writer, and that interaction, expressed with words, feeling, and the heart, is what distinguishes literature from history or manifesto. May I give you an example? D. H. Lawrence wrote a splendid poem about a mosquito. The poem is called "Mosquito". He talks about how insignificant the mosquito is. But you feel, as you are reading the poem, that the mosquito is right there and that the poem is forming itself as the speaker considers the mosquito, which is actually on him, and which bites him (as mosquitos do). I love this kind of work, the work where it seems that there really isn't any work, and that's the words come directly from the experience. Philip Larkin has some interesting words about subject and poetry too. He says that a good poem about failure is a success. He could have added the corollary, namely that a bad poem about success is a failure, but he probably thought that that would go without saying. So it's not the subject that matters, in my opinion, but the way that the subject is engaged with.

L.P. Your poetry is highly recognized in many countries. Where do you take ("borrow") the rich images for your poems?

R.C. You ask things in the nicest way! I don't consciously think about images. They occur to me. Sometimes I feel that they are suggested at some level by a word or two in the things I've read, or heard – often misread or misheard. Miss-readings and miss-hearings strike me as very interesting.

L.P. What are the most important topics/issues for you to explore in the 21st century?

R.C. Forgive me, but I think there are dangers in this question, and I'll come back to them. I never set out to write about something or someone I think of as specifically "relevant" to the times we live in. I (and I suppose many other writers)

write about something important to oneself. Of course that self is affected and has its roots, all manner of cultural influences and currents. But I think if one “set out” to write about, say, the Holocaust, one wouldn’t end up with a feeling piece of work. If such a poem came from an inner feeling, unforced, then it would probably be a success. My parents were brought up in wartime austerity, and I suppose a good deal of this has come down to me. I have seldom written about it, though. On the other hand, I believe that on some level it has infused my attempts at poetry.

L.P. How do you manage to achieve the impressive emotional coloring power in your poetry?

R.C. Thank you indeed. Let me answer this generally rather than personally, this time. Let’s say one feel something, and starts to write. One must always be truthful. One can’t deceive oneself, or allow oneself to be led by sound and rhythm at the expense of truth. A false note somehow always announces itself, don’t you think?

L.P. Roger, you consider yourself to be an immigrant who immigrated from England to the USA. What is emigration/immigration for you? What does it mean to you as a creative poet?

R.C. I suppose that emigration and immigration are really two words for the same action. I mean, if you emigrate from somewhere, you have to immigrate somewhere else, don’t you?

L.P. How could you define emigration/immigration in general?

R.C. I don’t think that the general definitions of emigration are tremendously helpful – what matters is how the individual feels, and possibly how individuals (collectively viewed, although they of course aren’t collective) feel.

L.P. May I ask you about the reasons for your emigration to the USA?

R.C. Of course you may. I lived the first thirty years of my life in the UK, then moved to Turkey. I say “moved” rather than “emigrated” (and I’ve never thought this until you asked me) because at some level I must not have thought I would be living in Turkey for good. But when I left Turkey, after four and a half years, to live and work in America, I did consider it for good.

But I was wearying of working in Turkey, and I badly needed a change. One can do something for too long, don’t you think? When I had that small Beineke Fellowship at Yale I found myself enjoying things very much indeed; and felt my mind somehow opening. That’s when I started wanting to emigrate. I have to say that one can’t “emigrate, just like that”. I was so lucky to have found a job in America. I went to New Haven, Connecticut, from Turkey, without a job. I shall always be grateful to my former Dean, John Mahan, for offering me a job at Kent State University in Ohio. You know, I still find myself amazed, after almost twenty years of living here, to be living here, and I wonder how many other immigrants feel the same, or similar.

L.P. Are you more inspired to work and create your poetry in the USA?

R.C. I don't think I'd ever have done any creative writing if I hadn't moved to America. Certainly I never felt that way in England, nor did it ever cross my mind when I was living in Bursa or Izmir, in Turkey. I wish it had. But when I had a tiny fellowship at Yale (I was still working in Turkey then) I started doodling some awful sub-T.S. Eliot lines about it beginning to rain. Or some such. But when I actually started working in America, I came across Frank O'Hara, and Robert Lowell's *Life Studies*, and the fresh air seemed to blow through them, in a way that it never seemed to me to do in England. Does that make sense? I always felt that so much of English poetry (not the best of it, but so much) seemed to be looking rather anxiously over its shoulder.

L.P. Roger, was it difficult for you, a celebrated poet and a professor of English, to go through the process of assimilation, acculturation and Americanization in the USA?

R.C. As I mentioned, I hadn't written any poetry then, and I certainly would never call myself a "celebrated poet", or even a poet at all. I don't earn my living by poetry, and I'm always very uncomfortable when people introduce themselves as "poets". This sounds conceited to me. And no, I didn't find it difficult to fit in. People were very kind, and although in the early days it felt strange to be living in America, at the same time it felt completely natural. And right.

L.P. Was the process successful? Do you consider yourself to be an English poet or an American poet?

R.C. As far as how I regard myself, I try not to regard myself at all. I suppose if you pressed me, I'd say that I am an Englishman, with largely English sensibilities (you don't shake thirty years of these off, but maybe they get diluted), living and writing in America. Again, I stress, with gratitude, that it was only in America that I tried to write poetry, so something in my English makeup must have responded to finding myself in America, in the land, and among Americans (whom I very much like, by the way).

L.P. Do you perceive the author of *Lolita* Nabokov, Brodsky and other writers from Eastern Europe as American writers? Are they included in American Literature?

R.C. This is a good question, and a difficult one. *Lolita* is a novel steeped in the American landscape, and written in English, of course. Does this make Nabokov American? Obviously not, but at the same time I rather doubt that anyone reading *Lolita* and not knowing its author's nationality would perceive the novel as anything but American. Brodsky's poems, on the other hand, don't to me exhibit a primarily American-sounding voice in the way that Nabokov's novels do.

L.P. Do you experience nostalgia? Is nostalgia one of the driving forces (an artistic impulse) for you to create your poetic works?

R.C. Yes, I do experience nostalgia, but not ever in the sense of wanting to return to England permanently, or longing even to be there right now. Nostalgia, to me, means primarily those kinds of impulses. I do rely greatly on memory, on

remembering times that were fulfilling, generally with my parents before their marriage frayed. Or on places. I find that certain English places, and how I remember feeling in those places, are most resonant. But I can sense you are thinking that such memories can be factually unreliable, or softened through time. And I agree that they can be. But I don't think that these considerations matter when one is trying to write a poem. So yes, I do feel nostalgia, but with those qualifications:

Expatriate's Song:

These early summer afternoons of showers
Are times for windows great and wide
And the lute and guitar of Julian Bream
And watching grass as old as England
Growing greener with the rain.

As you know, Julian Bream is an English lutenist. I started listening to him seriously in America, although my parents had a vinyl record of him playing. It's odd to listen to quintessentially English music in America. There is a piece by Bream called "Packington's Pound," that always makes me think of a man ploughing a field, slowly, towards the end of day, in the English countryside.

L.P. Thank you! How do you combine your experience received both in the Old and in the New World (the past and the present) in your poetry?

R.C. I just write things as they somehow come to me, as I suppose most people do, who write. And since I've lived more or less equal time in the Old World and the New, what I write must come from life, to some degree. I can't say I consciously try to "combine":

The Cock and the Chorus Girl
The taxi driver told me, laughing, how
the businessman, as soon as he moved in,
complained about the village cock, so
inconsiderately early starting up his crow,
and then of all the cows, lowing down the road,
from byre to field.
The driver called the cows "the chorus girls"
(in his mirror's view I smiled)
and said they'd been this way, you understand,
nigh on five hundred years.
Nigh on five hundred years. Check-in, passport control,
and England dwindling below, obscured
increasingly by cloud. I closed my eyes,
allowed my mind to graze.
The old ways.
The old ways moving through the centuries.

Every time I fly into England, I think the same thing, when I see the beautiful English countryside from the air – the fields, sheep, cows, roads, and farmsteads. There were at least three possible endings I experimented with. The current one is the mildest. And of course the title is rather mischievous.

There and here
In England, outlines blur:
Church, hill,
Village, pub and field
Are smudged, bruised
By cities
Crowding in.
But here the roads go on and on and on
Through the cities
Make light of them.
And beyond the sun-purged sky
Run unfenced empty roads
With buzzards, high in thermols,
Encircling a world as free and wide as self.

In 1980 I went across America on Greyhound buses, from Hell's Kitchen in New York to Mission Street in San Francisco. All of it seemed huge, and changed my way of seeing Britain, which always was so small to me after that. Britain has country roads hemmed in by hedgerows. As I child I heard my father, driving my mother and me near Cambridge, exclaiming "the open road!"

L.P. Do you pay more attention to the description of the inner world of a personality or to the historical/cultural/social particularities?

R.C. I always attend to the inner world of a personality, and only to the other things tangentially, stemming from the personality in question. If one sets out to write about historical/cultural/social particularities, one is more likely to end up writing a manifesto or a treatise rather than poetry (which should reach the heart). When I was an undergraduate, I would always resent having to write essays about "Shelley as a political poet," say. It struck me then, and it strikes me now, that literature has to be more than circumstances; otherwise it's not so much literature as it is history, or politics, or a cultural exploration of some kind.

L.P. Do images appear unexpectedly or do you depict different pictures in your poems consciously?

R.C. I think that images simply occur in the process of writing. May I tell you a thing or two about how I go about it, please? I read a line into a pocket recorder, and play it back at myself for as long as I can stand the sound of my own voice. That's how, for me, the next line or lines will come; and I think that's how the images come. Of course there's an intent, meaning that one hopes that one's image or images work, but I never set out intending to construct a piece containing "this

image” and then “that image”. Also, I’ve noticed that if I have a good night’s sleep, the net lines will often be in my head “without my stir”, as Macbeth says. Equally, being tired can relax the mind, and bring about a receptiveness.

L.P. Is autobiographical impulse strong in your poetic works? Does memory help you create your beautifully arranged poems? How does your memory work?

R.C. You ask the nicest questions! Yes, there is a very strong autobiographical impulse indeed in my attempts. I suppose all creative work is autobiographical insofar as it comes from one person only, but I think mine is particularly so. Sometimes I even try to disguise the “I” by using “you” or “he” – as perhaps you’ve guessed. And yes, memory does help, but that isn’t to say that my stuff is tied by memory. I’ll invent things fairly frequently, as I go along (as long as such inventions fit the flow and rhythm, and are honestly-felt, while being inventions).

L.P. Do you dedicate poems to your relatives? Is the autobiographic impulse include literary characters/portraits of your parents, relatives, friends?

R.C. Yes. I have dedicated books (most of them, in fact) to my parents. I owe them the greatest debt. Occasionally I’ll dedicate a poem to a close friend. Mind you, one must be pretty sure that the friend would be pleased! Philip Larkin initially dedicated a poem to my dear father – and then changed his mind! And yes, the autobiographical impulse includes relatives and friends: I suppose one isn’t so much actually writing about relatives and friends as one is writing about how you view them, so I suppose that such poems too are autobiographical. I don’t feel that I’ve put that very well but I hope you see what I mean.

L.P. What can you advise to the young generation of poets and writers?

R.C. Just write things honestly. Keep writing. Don’t look over your shoulder and worry about those who have come before you.

L.P. Thank you very much for your informative and interesting questions! I wish you good luck with your creative work! Look forward to your new books and poems!

R.C. Lyuba, it is a pleasure.