

The Consequences: Anna Ross interviews Robert Hass for Guernica

Guernica: Do you have a sense of how the poetry world around you has changed since Field Guide came out in 1973?

Robert Hass: I don't know that I had a sense that there was such a thing as 'the poetry world' in the 1960s and early 70s. Maybe poets did, but for me as an onlooker and reader of poetry, poetry felt like it was part of a larger literary world. I mean, even the phrase 'the poetry world' reflects a sort of balkanization of American literary and artistic life that has to some extent happened since then. Fiction writers have their own world, and poets have their own world, and literary criticism has sort of passed over into cultural studies in the university, and so on. They seem more disconnected from each other than they did when I first began to write. At the same time, there is an exponential increase in the numbers of writers and of books being published. That is, I think it's true to say that in 1973 I could read every book of poems that was published in a year, and I did. I believe, according to Poet's House, that there were 1,200 books of poetry, including translations, published in this country last year, which means that if you read three books a day you couldn't read all the poetry that's being published. So that's a big difference, and I think the cause of that difference, or at least the institutional form that it has taken, is creative writing programs.

Guernica: Which are ubiquitous, aren't they?

Robert Hass: When I graduated from college, which was 1963, there were two; well, there was Iowa and then you could get a Masters in creative writing at Stanford on the way to a PhD. I think that might have been it in the whole country. And therefore it didn't occur to me to get a degree in creative writing. When I applied to Stanford, I applied for graduate work in the PhD program, not to the creative writing program, mostly because though I had some vague ambition of becoming a writer and I was trying to write poems and essays and stories, I didn't feel like I was far enough along to submit work to some place and have it judged. Also, I was trying to figure out how to make a living [laughing], and it didn't seem like a career path. I don't think it even entered my head as one of the things that I might do.

Guernica: Do you think that this proliferation of poetry, alongside its separation from other literary genres, has strengthened it?

Robert Hass: Well, the proliferation is good. The professionalization of poetry, or the balkanization, has come out of the fact that when you apply to most creative writing programs, you have to choose your genre. And so, at twenty-one, someone who wants to write is signing up for two years of committing themselves to write poetry or fiction or nonfiction. There are very few programs in which you can cross over. On the one hand, the reasons make sense to me. If you're going to take your shot for two years at writing something, concentrate and write

something, and of course many people who begin in one genre end up in another. But on the whole, it probably funnels people into a specialty too soon.

Guernica: And students may not feel that they want to experiment after they've made that decision?especially while competing for teaching jobs.

Robert Hass: Yes. Of course, as this is happening there are also a lot of ways, especially in more experimental writing, in which the boundaries between fiction and nonfiction, between prose and poetry have broken down or become an area of experimentation.

Guernica: I wonder how you think this affects the readership of poetry. It seems to me that most of the people I know who read poetry are also writers of poetry and that it might not go too much further in terms of audience. I don't know if that's a result of this schism that you're pointing to.

Robert Hass: I don't think so. I think the important thing to say about this area is that we don't know. That is, there's very little solid research on readership, yet people make pronouncements about it all the time.

?If you were making poetry out of convictions?you were in the territory of rhetoric, and that wasn't the territory of poetry.?

It seems like every ten years there's a book that says that poetry used to be popular, and now it's not, but we really have no way of knowing, in terms of relative size of audience and other things, exactly who readers were. One thing we do know is that mass literacy is a product of the 19th century, at least in English-speaking cultures?Ireland, England, Scotland, Canada, and the U. S. You only had widespread literacy and books that people could afford in the middle of the 19th century. Did more people read poetry at the turn of the 20th century when there were about fifty million people? When Emily Dickinson's poems were published in the 1890s, they were a best-seller; the first book of her poems went through eleven editions of a print run of about 400. So the first print run out of Boston for a first book of poems was 400 for a country that had fifty million people in it. Now a first print run for a first book is maybe 2,000? So that's a five-time increase in the expectation of readership. Probably the audience is almost exactly the same size as it was in 1900, if you just took that one example.

Another part of this is that I think one percent of the population attended college when Wallace Stevens and Robert Frost and Gertrude Stein were at Harvard. Now I think forty percent of Americans have some college education. That's an astronomical change. In the beginning of the 19th century, maybe forty percent of women and fifty percent of men could produce a signature, which meant that they'd had at least three years of education because it was in third grade that people started penmanship in the 19th century. And of course black people could get killed if they got caught teaching themselves to read in some parts of the country.

Guernica: Everybody memorized poetry, as well.

Robert Hass: Yes. Literature, the study of literature in English in the 19th century, did not belong to literary studies, which had to do with Greek, Latin, and Hebrew, but instead with elocution and public speaking. So when people read literature, it was to memorize and to recite it. Anyway, all of this is to say that it's terribly hard to get a handle on, first of all, our own experience right now?who's reading and who's writing?and secondly, it's very hard to get any kind of comparative hold on it to say that things have changed. My suspicion is that once you have literacy in place, the readership has not changed very much.

Guernica: So if we can't say with certainty how readership and writing have definitively changed in the last century, or even in the last thirty or forty years, how has your own work or your own approach to poetry changed since you came out with your first book?

Robert Hass: I don't quite know the answer to that question. My first book was published when I was thirty-two, so I think it was basically finished when I was thirty or thirty-one. And so then you think, "Well, what have you failed to do?" And my answer to myself was almost everything. Prose gets divided up into fiction and nonfiction and short fiction and long fiction and autobiographical nonfiction and so on. Poetry can do any of those things except with the added definition of intensified formal pressure. Anyway, I felt like I hadn't done very much. And you try to do something different in the next book and then something different than that. So, I don't know. I think someone else would be better at answering the question of how my work has changed.

Guernica: Well, I've been looking through some of your work, and one thing that I noticed is that you have tackled so-called political issues, such as war and human rights abuses, in your poetry; but you've also written poems that are very closely linked to or drawn from your personal life and history, and I'm wondering if you find those two to be very different modes of writing, if they're linked at all, if one informs the other?

Robert Hass: When I began writing poems, it was in the late 60s and early 70s when the literary and cultural atmosphere was very much affected by what was going on in the world, which was, in succession, the civil rights movement, the antiwar movement, and the women's movement in the 60s, 70s, and into the early 80s. And all of those things affected me and affected my thinking, particularly the Vietnam War.

I wouldn't feel guilty about not writing about Baghdad if I didn't have any good ideas about how to write about it.?

Like everyone else, I was at least peripherally involved in the antiwar movement. You woke up every morning feeling tormented about what was going on in Vietnam. It seemed to a lot of us like a catastrophe from the very beginning, inflicting immense and needless suffering on not only the American soldiers but on a lot of innocent peasants who were caught in a Cold War proxy battle?two million Vietnamese died during those years, and you woke up every morning knowing that that was going on. So the question of how and whether one could write political poems was very much in the air, and there were lots of examples out there. Allen Ginsberg,

Adrienne Rich, Denise Levertov, Robert Bly, Galway Kinnell, Robert Duncan?to think of writers who I thought of as representing the new poetry then, the generation of poets I was reading when I was starting to write. They were writing about war and about politics. So there?s that, but also, in the Bay area where I was growing up, and among the Beats, there?s the example of a lot of terrible, self-righteous political poetry that didn?t seem very helpful.

So I guess I came of age with two prejudices: that one ought to try to think about those things and include them in your work if you can, and that politics is not the area where poetry is likely to do what it does best. The quote that we all had in our minds was Yeats: ?Poetry is a man arguing with himself; rhetoric is a man arguing with others.? If you were making poetry out of convictions?trying to convince other people?you were in the territory of rhetoric, and that wasn?t the territory of poetry. I think that?s pretty smart. I think that it doesn?t need to be altogether true, but that was my starting place. One of the interesting things about the history of poetry in the 16th, 17th, and 18th centuries is that people who read liked getting their information in rhyme just as much as in prose. The genre that we would think of as nonfiction often was written in verse in forms like the Georgic when people thought that one of the tasks of poetry was conveying arguments and information in a pleasant way.

Guernica: That sounds like Pope.

Robert Hass: Pope was actually at the tail end of that idea. After Pope, in the beginning of Romanticism, people developed the idea that imagination rather than reason was a special form of knowledge and its best expression is through poetry. Therefore, poetry should not try to do the stuff that mere prose does: convey information or make arguments about ideas. So the long poem in the 19th century became a narrative poem. Of course, how many overtly political poems do we read from the 16th century?

Guernica: None.

Robert Hass: Zero. There are either poems about sex/love or God.

Guernica: Or both.

Robert Hass: Or both. Milton was the first person who really experimented with putting politics into sonnets. Anyway, I don?t know how relevant running through all of this history is, except to say that we have inherited mixed feelings about the possibility of writing about politics. Someone in Ireland asked me how many Republican poets there were in the U.S., and I thought maybe two. Maybe there are 10,000 poets, and maybe there are two Republicans among them. [laughter] Well, that would be another set of research. It?s all part of that sociology. Another aspect of this is that if you?re writing a poem about these things, if you, in general, come down on the side of justice or come down on the side of nature against the machine or any of the large, simple-minded bifurcations that we operate out of, you can know ahead of time that you?re preaching to the converted, which is another difficulty.

Guernica: It seems to be a sort of Dickinson vs. Whitman argument.

Robert Hass: Yes, on the one hand, Emily Dickinson during the Civil War, during the most violent and tumultuous upheaval?though it didn't touch her life directly?in the 19th century, wrote 1,000 of the most amazing lyric poems in the English language, and except for a small item of imagery here and there, they have nothing to do with it.

Guernica: Meanwhile, Whitman was writing about being a field nurse.

Robert Hass: Yes, the other example. Whitman quit his job and went to Washington to nurse the wounded and then wrote about it.

Guernica: And also wrote poems exhorting American society to stand up and become unified.

Robert Hass: He took American society as a fact and as a metaphor and the thing at the very center of his vision.

Guernica: When you talk about your experience during the Vietnam War, in terms of feeling as though you should write about it, that sounds, of course, very familiar to what many of us feel now regarding the Iraq War. So has your idea about whether to include politics in your poetry changed at all? Or do you still feel a little bit guilty about it?

Robert Hass: No, I don't think it ever changed very much, although I've thought about it more. One of the things I thought while I was writing the poems in Field Guide, and it's something I guess I still feel, is that poetry had in the hands of various people become a place for inconvenient knowledge insofar as it was a place for knowledge at all. But it was a place where you could talk about other kinds of experience than the official version.

?One way to escape the universe in which everything is a kind of media cartoon is to write about the part of your life that doesn't feel like a cartoon, and how the cartoon comes into it.?

For example, nobody growing up in California really studied California history (and there are probably a lot of problems with this analogy), but during the time the Vietnam War was going on, I was reading about the history of the west in the 19th century, which was in many ways a land grab. I was thinking that our history doesn't look at our own violence, the violence in our own past, and we go out and repeat it someplace else. One of the poems that tries to think about politics in Field Guide is a poem called ?Palo Alto, the Marshes? that I wrote partly because I discovered in my reading that the daughter of the guy who began the San Francisco rancho land grab, whose fiancé was murdered by Kit Carter and a couple of Pawnee Indians in the reeds off San Quentin during the Bear Flag War, retired to a ranch in Redwood City near Palo Alto, where I was studying. That ranch had become the Dow Chemicals napalm manufacturing plant and the place from which some of the napalm was being shipped through the Golden Gate on freighters to Vietnam. So, we don't know our own

story.

Guernica: That's frightening.

Robert Hass: But to answer the original question, Pound described poetry as original research in language, and just as formal experiment in poetry has to try things and has to go too far, so does experiment with writing about politics in poetry and what the politics of poetry is.

Guernica: Do you feel as though writing about political subjects is a responsibility?

Robert Hass: Robert Duncan has this wonderful definition of responsibility; he said, "It means keeping the ability to respond." I think that my responsibility to my art is to try to get it right or to push the boundaries of what I'm able to do in any way. So I think that were I in the middle of an obsession to write about, say, sudden oak death in California or my grandchildren or time and memory and how they look when you get to be in your sixties, and I thought, "Well, yes but people are dying every day in Baghdad," I wouldn't feel guilty about not writing about Baghdad if I didn't have any good ideas about how to write about it. But I find I do think about that. I find myself reading Brecht, Milosz, writers who tried to put politics and the political responsibility of poetry, at different times of their writing lives, at the center of their thought.

Guernica: How did working with Milosz affect this idea or this approach?

Robert Hass: Well, it made me think about it in two ways. One is that he belonged to a generation of European writers who thought that political responsibility was part of the deal. He wasn't happy about it. He had a sort of ironic attitude toward his wonderful passage in his "Treatise on Poetry" when he's in America after WWII and thinking, "God, I could stay here and become an American poet; I could become a pedagogue of pears [laughter] and have nothing but the subjects of sex and death to write about, and I wouldn't have to write about history and the nature of evil and the nature of violence and what's in the human heart." I think in one way it's an ironic take on Stevens as an inheritor of the tradition of Valéry and of grand high symbolist poetry—that you can aim for perfection if you stay away from the hard subjects. But if you're going to do what Milosz does, you can't aim for perfection; your work is going to be messy and opinionated.

I remember on one occasion he'd written a poem about the Serbs in Kosovo or about the Europeans not responding to what was going on in Bosnia, and it was a bit of a rant. The New York Times wanted to publish it on their op-ed page, and we were working on it, and he sort of turned to me—I was just trying to be helpful and not commenting on it—and he said, "So what do you think of this poem?" And I hesitated for a second to think what I was going to say, and he said, "OK, well I know it's not a very good poem, but sometimes you have to be less ashamed about writing a bad poem than you would be about being silent."

Guernica: He really felt that he had to write about politics, felt it as a responsibility?

Robert Hass: Well, he felt that it mattered to speak up.

Guernica: Your poem "Bush's War" deals with politics but also has a very personal appeal. It starts with the writing of the poem, and then you bring in the beautiful image of waiting for the train with the cherry blossoms, and then you go into all of the historical and contemporary imagery of war. It seems as though perhaps that melding of the personal and the political could be an answer to how to write about these things.

Robert Hass: Maybe. Another problem about writing about politics in the "age of globalization" is that so much of the violence in the form of war and also in the forms of institutional violence—sweatshops, child labor, victimization of people economically—happens elsewhere and out of sight. And when we do know about it and need to witness it, it's always mediated by images of one kind or another, so you're kind of stuck trying to write about what it's like trying to be you living your life thinking about and experiencing this stuff in that way. That is, one way to escape the universe in which everything is a kind of media cartoon is to write about the part of your life that doesn't feel like a cartoon, and how the cartoon comes into it.

Guernica: So are poets, as Shelley asserted, the unacknowledged legislators of their time?

Robert Hass: No! [laughter] Shelley is wrong about that. And I don't think he'd given much thought at all to legislating. I think that what art can do is refresh our sense of justice, wake us up to what we've taken for granted in the political realm, as in the other realms. For instance, haiku is an art that seems dedicated to making people pay attention to the preciousness and particularity of every moment of existence. I think that poetry can do that. The problem with describing poets as legislators is that at that level of politics?politics as political invention?poets have no special skills and are not apt to. It's clear that there has to be some play between the vitality of invention in economic life and some regulation of it, and in some ways the great ideological wars of the 20th century that cost so many lives had to do with whether to have managed economies directed by government or economies directed by the free movement of capital, which is only partially subject to government regulation. So, do poets have any insight into what's the right ratio? I doubt it, but I think that they can be awake to what the ends are. Where politics is concerned, I think poets have to be pragmatists, philosophical pragmatists, in the sense that William James, I think, said about principles: "If you ask me if I have this or that principle, tell me what its consequences are, and then I'll tell you whether I have that principle or not." I think that poets can say, "What we want is for everybody on earth to wake up free from fear and with access to medicine and clean water and education." But I don't think poets have any special insight on how to get there. And the 20th century is a pretty good record of that because so many of the great poets were Stalinists: Vallejo, Neruda, Eluard, Aragon, etc. They wrote their odes to Lenin and Stalin. They glorified some of the most violent and grotesque dictatorships of the 20th century. And a lot of the ones who were not Stalinists were fascists or fascist sympathizers. So when it came to what was the right way to get there, the poets were wrong more often than not, which makes the poets who just didn't talk about politics, like Wallace Stevens, or the poets who were kind of anarchic democrats like Lawrence or Williams look really good.

Guernica: And their work stood up.

Robert Hass: Yes, although there's a good deal in Pound's and Eliot's poetry that stood up even though their politics were deplorable. Or Pound's very deplorable, Eliot's kind of deplorable.

Guernica: I find Pound difficult to teach because I always feel as though I have to include the caveat that he was a virulent anti-Semite and fascist sympathizer.

Robert Hass: Yes. But on the other hand, I think that one has to try. Another thing that Milosz says at the beginning of the "Treatise on Poetry" is that he had become ashamed of poetry because it was as if in his time all the great contests were fought in prose and poetry was the place of private feeling. His own place as a poet and a reporter on his own private feelings, his ardors and revulsions and fears and longings?it seemed to him a bit indecent. He said one stanza of well-written verse ought to bear more weight than a whole shelf-load of prose.

Guernica: There's a goal.

Robert Hass: One of the things I felt like with "Bush's War" is that it wasn't so much the

argument of weapons of mass destruction that made me feel so crazy about the war?even though I knew, and almost anybody I knew also knew, that there weren?t any weapons of mass destruction?but that he was able to stand up in public and say that he, personally, had made the decision to liberate the Iraqi people. That meant he made the decision to get?let?s say he had conservative estimates at that time?10,000 to 100,000 innocent Iraqi civilians killed in order to liberate the nation of Iraq and bring them democracy. Let?s say that the Pentagon told him that they thought that they could bring this thing off with only 10,000 civilian casualties. At least, he ought to have had to line them all up on the White House lawn and shoot 10,000 people and say, ?You didn?t get to vote on this, but the rest of Iraq is going to get to be free, and I think this is the greater good.? It just made me crazy, that argument, and I didn?t see anybody contesting it. Maybe the left didn?t bother to contest it because it was so outrageous, but I just wanted to say someplace in plain English that those people didn?t get to vote on their deaths.

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