



Compass Rose

Literature and Art Journal

Interview with Eliot Schain

Compass Rose:

As you were developing as a writer, were there any artists you tried to emulate? How did that affect your work?

Eliot Schain:

Jack Kerouac was my hero when I was a young writer. His life inspired me to travel around the country and develop a voice that could speak comprehensively about the American experience and its lifestyles. I also admired the way he could extend a line to break the traditional syntaxes, make the emotional punch more powerful, and get so much in before the breath was finished. Packing a lot into one long extended breath becomes a metaphor for the nation as a whole.

CR:

How do you approach a new piece?

Schain:

I'm not sure; it varies. I used to write more regularly, when I had time. I would often begin with an emotion, and write "automatically" until the metaphors grew fresh, and then I would follow the instincts until I felt finished. Usually I go for some flourish or tie-up at the end. I believe in writing from instinct rather than rational direction, because the great work comes from the unconscious, and rational directions can't get us there. These days, I just take what I can get. I recognize it often requires a week or more of writing to dig through the conscious baggage before you'll get to the unconscious gold. In my present circumstances—two jobs, a family—I rarely have the liberty to work that way.

CR:

Explain how you deal with criticism.

Schain:

I'm very bad with criticism. I think the fact that I don't take it well has hindered my career as a writer. I walk away from situations instead of looking at the critique as an opportunity for productive growth. On the other hand, the authentic voice can be ruined by criticism, especially if too much is given early in one's career. At Squaw Valley Community of Writers—a retreat for writers—the poets don't believe in criticism. For the week you're there, you write and share, but without criticism, only encouragement. I think it's a marvelous idea.

CR:

Do you have a history of writers or poets in your family? If not, how did you know you wanted to become a poet?

Schain:

My father writes philosophy. My great grandfather was a poet. When I was young I wanted to write fiction primarily, but when I applied to graduate programs in creative writing, both Iowa and Columbia accepted me for poetry but not fiction. So that launched me as a poet.

CR:

What reactions do you aim to extract from your readers? Do these reactions change when you write poetry?

Schain:

I would love it if my readers had profound emotional responses—tears or ecstatic joy. Even “eager puzzlement” would be good. Mostly I want them to feel a sense of recognition, even if they can’t put their finger on exactly what it is they recognize.

CR:

Describe your writing process.

Schain:

As I mentioned earlier, I begin with an emotion. Then I try to write instinctually, letting the metaphors rise, until they seem fresh and relevant. Then, as the metaphors keep coming, I allow some rational thought to seek connectors—ligaments if you will—that bind the metaphors together. Often I will allow philosophical statements to serve as ligaments, but add irony so they sound less pedantic.

CR:

What's the strangest thing you've done to support your writing?

Schain:

Teach high school. No, seriously, cook in a restaurant. I was totally ill-equipped. Or maybe it was when I worked as an assistant for a crazy artist who’d been contracted by the Metropolitan Museum in New York to rehabilitate Plexiglas sculptures.

CR:

Do you think that your experiences as a high school teacher has had an influence on your poetry?

Schain:

My experiences as a high school teacher probably have not helped my poetry. Teaching in a public high school, with its relentlessness and demands, can be soul-deadening,

which does not encourage poetry. On the other hand, I talk all day about interesting things. And I get to know young people. Those things help.

CR:

Do you prefer form or free verse when you write your poetry and if you do, then why do you?

I have mostly written in free verse. Occasionally I feel the compulsion to rhyme, which unnerves me. But my main commitment is to Whitman's vision of poetry unhooked from rhyme and meter, so the spirit of American liberty and individualism can find its expressions. I do believe in intrinsic form, but for me it is an intuitive combination of compression and oratory.