

## RICHARD & ROGER

Alice Goode-Elman, Editor. *Complete Poems of Richard Elman 1955 - 1997*. Junction Press, 2017.

*William O'Rourke*

Richard Elman's posthumous nonfiction book *Namedropping* was one of his best, as was his last novel, *Tar Beach*. Elman (1934-1997) authored, by my count, 24 original works, the majority fiction. Along the way, he published four volumes of poetry, the first in 1975. Now his widow, Alice Goode-Elman, has, as many would say, lovingly put together a "Complete Poems" that runs 528 pages.

*Namedropping* (1998) was well named. It was a compendium of what passed for short biographies, and hence mirror-image autobiography, of many well-known figures, mainly writers of various sorts. At the time of its publication I supplied a blurb: *Richard Elman's Namedropping is the most refreshing of rogues' galleries, for all its rogues are articulate and accomplished. Here is a memoir in the form of biography, in the tradition of Ford Madox Ford, another learned and provocative man of letters. Elman is funny, irreverent, and, most of all, generous of heart.*

Cruelly, at least I thought it cruel, *The New York Times Book Review* gave it a very positive review, which may have, or may not have, generated library sales. Nearly twenty years later the book still hasn't aged, but the literary world has changed utterly, even though that change certainly was well underway by 1998. Here is a bit of the *NYTBR* review by Lee Siegel:

On the basis of these astute and entertaining pieces, it's clear that Elman had what Keats called negative capability—the ability to enter into other people's moral natures while suspending moral judgment—in abundance.... *Namedropping* is a slight but mostly absorbing collection. On the one hand, it offers some delicious gossip as a form of social history.... Mingled in with the gossip are tart and satisfying remarks like this one about Hunter Thompson, who once took Elman on a terrifying nighttime motorcycle ride: 'All I ever learned from his depictions of Las Vegas and political conventions I knew in kindergarten.' ... The really peculiar and riveting and exasperating quality to this collection is that for all Elman's many disappointments, he seems never to have lost his illusions. There are penalties for that, and though they might be unfair, they are not always undeserved.

As I was saying, why the review was cruel was that Richard was dead and he would never get to read it. Everyone likes praise. And some are more

likely to get it after they die. *The NYT Book Review*, by 1998, was more or less standing alone, and wielded a great amount of influence, both in sales and reputation. Richard had slipped into a hiatus of attention late in his life, mainly through the 70s and 80s, though gradually his standing was being resuscitated and the *Times* also reviewed *Tar Beach* in 1991. If you have a long career, you may be taken seriously for a while, but generations change, new “blood” flows into publications, and if you haven’t produced big sales you are more likely to be forgotten, or ignored, by the newbies. And when your cohort begins to die off, or retire, the younger generation has its own people to praise and promote. Other large forces are at play, too.

Indeed, I have always contended that the golden age of reading peaked at the end of the 1960s and then technology (VCRs, cable, eventually the all-consuming computer and its unholy offspring, the Internet) slowly chipped away at the national pastime and reading became another vanishing ability, especially reading so-called literary books, eroding the numbers down to, say, the amount of people who could play satisfactorily a musical instrument in the 1960s, a small percentage of the population.

Newspapers across the country have all, more or less, thrown overboard their literary book review sections, which, of course, give the very few (one? two?) that remain, a great deal of power. Authors have become overpopulated mice in a cage, resorting to cannibalism, as I witnessed as a small boy viewing a failed experiment run by an uncle when he was a hospital lab researcher.

The Internet, of course, is now the Tower of Babel come to electronic life, where everyone speaks, “writes”, sounds off. To reverse a Norman Mailer remark, the magnitude of the machine, the paucity of the result. In my youth two things in America were more or less free: t-shirts and ball-point pens. You could usually get one or another without too much trouble. Now to the list you can add a book, if you don’t care too much about what sort.

Back around the time of *Namedropping’s* publication, I used the phrase “person of letters” to describe the old tradition of the “man of letters,” given that many thought the latter phrase sexist. Unfortunately, person of letters is not a fluent coupling (doesn’t roll off the tongue, or anything else) and, these days, would not be appropriate, either. It would have to be she/he/they of letters, or some such. Language itself is taking a beating, since there are now words that some want no one to say, use. Richard was a true fellow of letters, in any case. Or guy of letters, since “guy” is now used androgynously, at least on TV, to include whomever is sitting around a table, male, female, whatever. “Thanks, guys.” The whole idea of “man” of letters has

been devalued in any case, taking on the patina of being a jack-of-all-trades, a pen for hire, talents spread too thin. And the phrase exudes an odor of belle lettres, not a scent the current generation finds enticing.

Richard wrote in all genres, aping those 19<sup>th</sup> century authors who wrote most anything they wanted, or could. Specialization became a post WWII-phenomenon. Why that is, was, isn't entirely obscure. Though I won't spell that out here. Let's just say being a person of letters was seen as a dead white male thing, though a woman author, or two, or three, also practiced the do-it-all trade, but the preponderance was male. Richard, alas, is now a dead white male, so he fits the bill.

A great number of predominately prose authors have written poetry—when they were young, but fewer continue to write it all their lives. Another acquaintance, R.D. Skillings (b.1937), is roughly Richard's contemporary—if Richard was still alive he would be 83—and another writer in the Guy of Letters mode. Roger has published mainly prose works and his last “book”, meaning the last he has finished before Alzheimer's began to claim him, is a collection of poems. Roger has been saying for the last few years that he was afflicted, but to my eyes and ears the condition has only descended upon him in classical fashion this year (2017). So his final poetry manuscript, completed, is called “Only Bones,” and one hopes it will be published soon.

Roger has published a previous volume of verse, *Memory for Marisa Rose*, in 2003. Poems from the new collection have been published in *Tri-Quarterly*, *the Virginia Quarterly Review*, among other venues. Roger has published a number of collections of short stories, a novella (*Obsidian*), 2001, and one demanding novel *How Many Die*, also in 2001, demanding in the sense of its content, the peak years when AIDS ravaged the gay population of Provincetown, Massachusetts. Along with the language problem these days—of what can and cannot be said, and by whom—Roger's sexuality is what is hideously called hetero-normative, or, worse, cisgendered, some such neologism. Find the ugliest words and you will find only politics, as George Orwell should have said. If Roger had been a gay writer, who knows how successful the novel would have been? As it is, only the lucky few have read it. But, as I said, his “reputation” has rested on his short stories. Here's a review from *Publisher's Weekly* on one of his collections, *Where the Time Goes* (1999):

*P-town, aka Provincetown, Mass., is the common ground of the dozens of motley characters in Skillings's beguiling fourth book of short stories. Skillings, who charted the same small-town's down-and-outers in P-town Stories: or, The Meatrack (1980), puts inventive, colloquial language to satisfying use in these innovative and darkly humorous tales. Successfully employing a wide range of voices, forms and lengths*

*(entries vary from one paragraph to several pages), he describes alcoholics falling off the wagon, gay men struggling with coming out and the havoc wreaked by AIDS. Everyone rails against conformity, including Kyle, the little boy with two mommies in "Sandbox," who has decided that he "prefers to be a girl." In "Coughlan Dice at His Closet Window," the narrator's glee at a young townie's ignominious retreat back to P-town from MIT is tinged with obvious envy as he comments, "they're [P-towners] glad to have their born faith confirmed that there's nothing up there beyond the bridge, nothing worth leaving town for." Those who stay in town battle their demons with strength, wit and a strong sense of the absurd, heading all the while for catharsis: solutions are elusive and almost always unexpected. One panacea, at least, is prescribed in "Op Ed," a cheeky take on Swift's "A Modest Proposal," in which the narrator advocates masturbation as the precursor to a reign of "joy and kindness."*

Though I have spent a long time involved with graduate creative writing programs (and I invented one at the University of Notre Dame), it is still difficult to imagine what the literary life of young people we have graduated will be. I do know what the literary life has been for my generation of writers. Transformative, as they say. Transitional, as others say. There is always a lag-time between generations. But, as I have indicated above, my cohort went from the golden age of reading to a post-literate world, from a triumphantly literate world where reading and writing were paramount in the culture, to a largely aural-visual world (graphic novels, anyone?), with other oral trappings (podcasts, anyone?). The era of enormous bookstores (Barnes & Noble, Borders) is now mostly over, but they contributed in their fashion, becoming book galleries, where people went to "see" books. Then, much to the displeasure of the corporations involved, they went to their computers to buy them, if so moved, at Amazon.

Yes, people still read. I could probably count on two hands the number of people who will read this. One hopes more, but.... The zone has been flooded. In my youth, the line was, "Everyone has one book in them." Now it is, "Everyone has one publisher in them." The number of "books" that are being published—if you just count the Library of Congress numbers—is astounding. That is because of the growth of the little presses, and their questionable offshoot, coterie publishers, where a group of friends get together and create presses. Thank God for publishing on demand!, so to speak. As I have written before on this subject, it's all Virginia Woolf's fault.

When I was finished with Columbia University's fresh MFA program in 1970, I would have never predicted that my generation of writers would end up cosseted in universities. In the late 1960s there were only a handful of "creative writing" programs to attend. Now, anything that calls itself a university has one. But, I wouldn't have predicted that, even if I had been in the prediction business. One primary reason was the continuing quest

for cheap labor in academia. There was a general decline of writing skills as the literate culture morphed into the oral culture and if places of higher education had writing programs at the graduate level they could staff many freshman (now “first year”) composition classes with cheap labor, aka grad student stipends.

The problem was so acute it has carried over even to Ph.Ds in English, the adjunct hamster-spinning-wheel, and Richard was on and off that wheel most of his life, as he pursued a living as a writer—his pen was for hire, sort of. One of his most read novels was the “novelization” of the hit film *Taxi Driver* (1976). Since he used his own name for that it didn’t help his reputation in the snobbish literary world. That changed, too. The snobbishness vis-a-vis Hollywood. Now, any association with *La La Land* is a plus, but not in the 70s-80s, when it was looked down upon.

I have had the unhappy experience of helping older writers in my life, unhappy because of the ironies involved. I procured Edward Dahlberg his last major publisher, prompting four books to appear, an ominous volume of his three early proletarian novels (*Bottom Dogs*, *From Flushing to Calvary*, *Those Who Perish*) and a new, decidedly non-working class novel (*The Olive of Minerva*), a circumstance which led to his—and my—editor leaving publishing. (He became an agent, though, of commercial fiction.) And I secured Richard a position at Notre Dame, just as our graduate creative writing program was getting under way. Both Dahlberg and Elman had been my teachers (Dahlberg at UMKC, Richard at Columbia). Roger was never my teacher, just my friend, and I am certain I have never done enough for him, other than publish a number of his remarkable stories and one essay, when I was the editor of the *Notre Dame Review*.

Not to make this a treatise on genre, but over the years I have told students that the material itself often seeks its own form. There are things that want to be poems, plays, stories, etc. One aspect of James Joyce’s career is that in many ways he demonstrated the evolution of most writers: first a poet (*Chamber Music*), then poetry-infused prose, then what would be considered (see Chekhov, etc.) traditional short stories (*Dubliners*), then a half-first novel (*Stephen Hero*), then the typical first novel (*Portrait of the Artist*), then the flowering of the form (*Ulysses*), then an unreadable masterpiece (*Finnegans Wake*.) It was a direct line upwards, a multiplying evolution. Woe to those writers who tried to duplicate it.

On a lesser scale there seems to be writers who are “natural” short story writers and who have a hard time graduating to long works. Or the reverse. It seems to hinge on a world view, a micro and/or macro inclination, seeing large or seeing small. One hopes it is all worth seeing. And, it has to be

admitted, that some writers, those who remain largely unpublished, just flail around, going from one sort of writing to another, always hopeful, mostly disappointed.



What called out to Richard in his early poetry? His widow points to his early influencers in her Introduction, when his poetry was noticed by his teachers his senior year in high school. The poets Richard read are what I call City Poets, largely male, Hart Crane, Walt Whitman, William Carlos Williams, that sort. When he finished college at Syracuse, he went off on a fellowship to Stanford, where he had a run-in with the elegant buzz-saw Ivor Winters, who made him feel “that every impulse that had impelled me to write poems was counterfeit,” he wrote in *Namedropping*. Winters, Richard claimed, made him feel that his poems were “high crimes and misdemeanors....” Well, a lot of writers who persevere often encounter harsh accomplished masters in their early years (and those writers are most often in their later years.) It can be helpful. What Richard may have learned from Winters is that he had more to write about than could be contained in verse.

Not that verse can't contain multitudes, etc. But Richard was outgoing, energetic, a big guy with boisterous ambition. His early work led to nonfiction in various outlets, the early novels were “historical” fiction, partly because his nonfiction was confronting the world head on, and he went a bit backwards in his early novels. He had a radio career, which lasted till he started criticizing Krugerrands on NPR. NPR had veered by the late 1980s into corporate sponsorship and they liked Krugerrands. His lively commentary there ended.

The first poem in Richard's first collection, *The Man Who Ate New York* (1975) and, in this one (beyond a dedication poem, very late, written when Richard knew he was dying, entitled “Dear Heart”), it remains this volume's first. The poem (“The Man Who Ate New York”) begins:

The man who ate New York  
began in the Bronx,  
licked his way slowly south,  
toward Spuyten Duyvil.

And so on. It ends in Brooklyn. One can immediately see two things. The first, its originality. No one but Richard ever wrote: *The man who ate New York began in the Bronx....* And that what is being said needs to be a poem. Even though poetry is prose, the length dictates how it is to be read

and, in this case, as poetry. It's always a puzzle a reader solves, usually knowing, if not always, the length of what they are just about to read. Length often tells them what it is they are going to read.

The last poem in the collection is short. It ("The afterlife is only strange") goes:

The afterlife is only strange  
to those who never had an afterthought:  
When Don Juan went to hell he saw  
his putative father-in-law.  
Don't ask me what I'm doing here, he said.  
Vengeance was mine. I'm damned by that design.  
Things do have shapes that we depict for them.

That was written shortly before his death and was "signed" J.H.S., standing for a pseudonym he used for a book (*Little Lives*, 1978) and other odd pieces in his life. I guess, in many ways, you turn into a pseudonym when you die.



Roger Skillings isn't dead, though, given his condition, any more new writing will be thought suspect. So, this last collection of poetry may be it, though there are other unpublished prose works finished before Alzheimer's has claimed him. If one wanted to put together a Collected anything for Roger, it should be the Collected Stories. He has published five volumes, the first *Alternative Lives* in 1974, the last, *Summer's End*, in 2016. It certainly has been his most used and favored form—and his most praised and known. Stories of his I published in the *Notre Dame Review* were cited in the *Best American Short Stories*, under the rubric of "notable", and the only essay of his I published was singled out in the *Best American Essays* volume. *The Pushcart Prize* volume also took note of his fiction.

Collected, a volume of his stories would show his prominence in the field; he's certainly, over his long career, one of the top twenty continuous American writers of remarkable short fiction. Such a book would, like Richard's *Collected Poems*, be well over 500 pages. As I have pointed out elsewhere, anyone connected to a creative writing program has encountered the fact that almost any writer can write one good short story. The short story, in a sub-rosa way, is the most amateur form in literature, given that even a novice can compose a more than polished example of the form. Oddly, this isn't done as regularly, or even irregularly, in poetry. Most amateur poems

are bad ones and those who write them don't, almost by accident, come up with a successful one out of the blue. And no one writes a good novel by accident.

It is not a test, but short story writers who excel, and can claim the title, do so over a long length of time, over and over. Again, think of Chekhov. He, too, prospered in more than one genre, namely his plays. But other multiple genre writers don't necessarily hit the same level every time they put pen to paper, or tips of fingers to plastic keys. I could do without Thomas Hardy's poetry, but couldn't live without his novels. There are other examples.

But, Roger's output and content have been long fixated on Provincetown, a village he hasn't really left in nearly five decades. Hence, he's thought of as being regional. William Faulkner actually got to Hollywood for a while, but Roger has stayed put. Richard was a traveler, often to exotic locations, a man (person? guy?) of the world, in a number of that phrase's meaning. I don't think Roger and Richard ever met (I may be wrong), even though Richard, too, spent a bit of time in Provincetown, in the usual way, during the summertime. Not so coincidentally, they both, separately, were friends with Louis Asekoff. It was Roger's intercession, his doing, that got me to contact Asekoff in New York City when I lived there, post Harrisburg. Louis threw remarkable parties then, populated with most of the active and well- and not so well-known writers in the City. At one such I was sitting next to Donald Barthelme and he asked me what I did and I recall saying, "Alas, I'm a writer." It may have been the same party that Craig Nova and I ended up both standing on our heads. I think we were trying to impress the many women writers who were there, too.

Unfortunately, the literary world of the 1970s and 80s hasn't been well documented. At least not by any profession biographers. All the connections between writers of the time have been mostly unrecorded, given that the whole notion of "generation" has largely become passe. The irony, and another example of the triumph of the oral (aural/visual) culture, is that various musicians, singers, etc., of the period have been well documented, obsessively, their overlapping lives of great interest to biographers and fanzines, *Rolling Stone* being one of the more prominent chroniclers. Patti Smith won a National Book Award before Bob Dylan won the Nobel.

Obviously, one other difference is economic, given the profit involved, the money generated for others by those artists' work. Our modern celebrity culture began with Ronald Reagan, the first "celebrity" to be elected president and, after that the deluge. Writers, as the years went on, didn't cease to multiply, but their incomes didn't swell. Indeed, so many of my generation



scattered to university writing programs around the country. And, in most every case, a few exceptions here and there, their salaries as teachers supported them.

Roger brought his “school” to him, insofar as he has been the literary glue that held the Fine Arts Work Center together over its existence, since the beginning of the 70s. Richard, as mentioned, taught intermittently. Putting so many American writers in university settings has been a phenomenon of the last 40 years, more or less. That fact is brand new, a condition that one can’t find in earlier American literary history. Not that in the mid-to-late Twentieth century an occasional writer didn’t stumble into a college somewhere. But never the wholesale housing of an entire generation of writers teaching, what?, students how to read and write?

Even though conservatives constantly complain that liberals have overtaken academia (they certainly haven’t overtaken university administrations, those who actually run the joints), putting a generation of writers there has, more or less, put that generation in protective custody. It was a savvy move, even though the powers-that-be didn’t quite bring it about on their own.

Roger’s *Only Bones* is once again a chronicle of Provincetown—with a bit of his childhood Maine thrown in. As one might gather by the title, *Only Bones* is full of the dead, or the near dead, homages to what has come and gone, both fauna and flora, places and people. Its first poem sets a tone, half eulogy, half jocular send off:

Fiddler’s Reach

A sloop  
in early days  
coming through the last  
elbow in the river  
saw with delight  
the long reach ahead.

A fiddler went out  
on the bowsprit to play a tune  
when the wind slat the jib,  
knocked him overboard  
and he drowned  
giving the place  
in time  
a gay name.

Did you have to look up “slat”? *To throw or dash violently*. A simple bit of verse that isn’t that simple. Vocabulary is often thought an indicator of IQ. But, these days, that sort of thing is suspect.

Since I'm all for parallel construction, the final poem in Roger's volume is called "Bird Feeder in the Rain" and here it is:

The cardinal in the privet hedge  
gladdened by the splashing drops  
cocks his black mask, flits tail.  
Nervy, frolicsome, his lot  
is not to know he's red, ephemeral  
in a dumb world. His drab mate  
keeps her grip on the clothesline pole,  
husking a seed, flinging mist and debris.  
She wings off. He follows instantly.

A migrating flock of evening grosbeaks  
gabble and fritter with their pods,  
out-battle the fat indignant jays,  
overfed residents, jealous of their place.

A bitter door bangs. The grosbeaks soar,  
one concussive, flashing arc, and settle  
snug as yellow Buddhas unanswerably  
still in winter's spectral tree.

It's a troubled marriage poem of sorts (that pair of cardinals, that bitter door banging); and it certainly contains nature observed meticulously, something not unexpected, given Roger's prose work, his piquant powers of observation. But the succor he takes in the ingratiating facts of the physical world is almost overwhelming. Titles of other poems in the volume are also somewhat expository: "Two Young Poets Drunk," "When the Genial Spirits Fail," "Faces of the Old." They, the poems themselves, all are mysteriously linked, much like the currently fashionable "novels" that are "rings" of stories, interconnected, with repeating characters, to pass somewhat fraudulently as "novels", or long, continuous narratives, sold to readers who are not satisfied with mere short stories. But, in Roger's case, these poems do function as, once again, a pictorial mosaic of a place and its denizens.

This, it should be clear by now, is less a review than an introduction to two remarkable writers, each not publicly praised and regarded as they deserve. Not that that is so singular in these times. There is a surplus of writers today, given the demand.

Both Richard and Roger are true poets, meaning their poetry is not a sideline, or whimsical offshoot, such as most, if not all, of John Updike's poetry. He could often be accused of penning light verse, a mere diversion from his many novels. Elman and Skillings are heavier than that.

But, unlike Updike, they have not entered the modern pantheon, the recognition of the literary establishment. I recall Richard's disappointment when his novel, written and published when I first encountered him, *An Education in Blood* (1971), did not become the success he had hoped for. Indeed, if you publish a novel that doesn't go into paperback, you've published a rare book.

And another mirage neglected older writers indulge in, is that they might be "rediscovered", brought forward to a new, eager, large audience. Alas, that would require the hardiest and rarest of humans, a critic or commentator who was a voracious reader, one who sets out to do just that. There may be a madding horde of writers, but nary any of that sort of pilgrim. Indeed, you can enter a strange, eerie world and become a writer who has published too much, and, therefore, no one is eager to spend the time actually reading so many books to chart your possible ascendancy. The only way into that nirvana is that a late book wins a big prize, such as the National Book Award, or some such.

But, as I've been claiming, we have been exiting a literary age, entering a new world, neither cowardly or brave, but different.

Yet, I am more than happy that Richard Elman's *Collected Poems* now exists. It is a boon to literature. Mary Karr (Mary Karr!) has provided a blurb for the volume, which begins, "Every lover of poetry will relish this gorgeous collection by the late Richard Elman." And I'm pleased that Roger Skillings' collection, *Only Bones*, exists—and likely to appear, thanks to some small press—even though everything that is published now is a hostage to fortune, but these days only more so. Such complaints go back a long time, a very long time; let's say, all the way back to Chaucer and his hopeful lament, *Go little book: go, my little tragedy*.