

Published in *Poetry Flash*, August 1987

Artistic Imperialism

My ninety-year old great-aunt writes from Colorado, “Well, dearie, I’m sure I’m just too dumb to understand, but how does someone *teach* poetry?” I write back to tell her this is a question I ask myself all the time, especially when I’m in front of a group of people who think of me as the teacher.

For years I’ve taught with California Poets in the Schools. Currently I work at San Quentin State Prison. In each case I’m going into a culture that is, basically, not my own. In each case I’m hired to bring something from my culture to people who already have their own cultural definition of what it is I’m there to teach: poetry. In each case I’m caught wondering about the limits of what I know, about the value of imposing what I know on what the kids or convicts already know.



People who teach visual arts in men’s prisons often refer to “prison art” as its own genre. This is work that is carefully rendered; it usually portrays a woman’s face or body, or a car, a motorcycle, and is most often copied from a photograph or a drawing in a magazine.

It’s not as easy to make generalizations about “prison poetry,” although many of the poems I’ve read by men in prison share certain characteristics. These poems often rhyme, they are usually abstract and didactic with a flowery, primarily Latinate, vocabulary. This writing is often what’s called “verse” and is, in fact, often combined with paintings or drawings on a card.

In other words, much of the poetry written in prison is different from the outside poetry world’s current aesthetic: it is of another culture. As Jeffrey Gray wrote in *Poetry Flash* (“Poems and Rocks: The Poetry of Objects,” November, 1986), “Across the United States, the directives in poetry workshops have echoed these dicta: avoid abstractions, use concrete details, use Anglo-Saxon words and avoid Latinisms.” “Prison poetry” breaks all these rules.

Although I myself have attended only one poetry workshop in my life, my own tastes tend to fit into the cultural norms as Gray states them. I like imagery, the sound of spoken speech. I appreciate a “show, don’t tell” approach and the detail that cracks my mind open. I most definitely am part of a specific – and limited – poetic culture.

Most of us – at least us artists in the Bay Area in the 1980s – respect native traditions. We appreciate Hmong story boards and Huichol yarn paintings and wouldn’t go around making suggestions for improvement based on our culture’s ideas about visual representation. But this same “most of us” working in schools or prisons or any place else think we’re supposed to “teach,” to tell someone else how to make their own creation better.

And in some sense, of course, we are. We’re hired to share what we know. Students come to our classes with the reasonable expectation that they’ll be able to learn something new and, therefore, grow in their work. After all, one definition of culture might be, “what one already knows, has been exposed to,” and one definition of teaching might be, “making people aware of what there is in the world they don’t already know about.”

So there’s a dilemma: who am I to impose my aesthetics on another person’s poetic process *versus* this other person deserves everything I know (even if what I “know” is opinion, taste), and I’m cheating if I hold back. Or, as Vicki Hearne writes (in her fine, fine book, *Adam’s Task*, a book “about” animal training and, also, about authority, language, philosophy and, for me, very deeply about teaching), “The trainer has occasion to be aware, as few people are, that human authority is corrupt to the core, and that any trope of ascendancy – especially the trope of nobility – stinks of the immodest, the self-righteous and the sadistic. Yet the trainer must get on with training the dog. The dog is compellingly present.”



I know Aunt Irene is concerned with cultural definitions of poetic aesthetics. As I say, she's ninety and the poems she read and wrote as a teen-ager are all rhymed and metered, fairly similar in form to "prison poetry." She wants to read the poems I write but, "honestly, Judy; I can't make heads or tails of them." Still, I think her question expresses not so much concern with the imperialistic dangers of teaching as amazement that a process of creation as personal as writing a poem could be *taught*.

And, once again, I agree. Each of us has our own particular path – as a human being, as a poet – and all we can do for each other (this is doing a lot) is to hold up a mirror to make it easier for the other to see where he is and what next step he might take.

In that one poetry workshop I did attend, a man read his poem. We went around the room for a very long time making suggestions. Finally Bob Hass said, "All we're doing is telling him how *we'd* write the poem." Instead of making suggestions, Bob had us each say what we saw happening in the poem, objective reporting. In this way the poet heard what was and what was not coming across in his work and was left to remedy the gap in his own way.

Or, I remember reading something Robert Bly wrote years ago in which he said if he had to teach a poetry workshop, he'd find a dozen cabins in the woods somewhere and demand that each student occupy one for six months and just sit there alone and write.



My own attempt to teach in the midst of what feels like a paradox requires that I bring in as much material as I can – guest artists representing a wide range of poetic possibilities, videotapes of readings from The American Poetry Archive, a whole library of books. I trust that students will find what's of value to them and apply this to their work.

My awareness of the paradox means that whenever I intervene, suggest alternate line break or leaving out a phrase or say "I love you" in images, I know as I speak that there is something immoral about a relationship in which my words are listened to because I'm the "authority." But when I veer too far in the direction of, "This is only my taste, my poetic prejudice," someone's going to bring me back with, "You're the teacher" and force me to accept the fact that indeed I am and that I must be willing to take on as much of that particular responsibility as I can bear. Again, quoting Vicki Hearne: "We do assume authority over each other constantly, or at least we had better do so if only to be able to say, 'Duck!' at the right moment...A refusal to give commands or to notice that commands are being given is often a refusal to acknowledge a relationship, just as is a refusal to obey."

Teaching *is* a relationship and that's why it's necessary to take very seriously the danger of avoiding responsibility. Ideally teaching is a human exchange, with authority and rights freely given.

So I always keep in mind the best words I've ever heard on pedagogy. They were spoken by Mark Morton at Greenwood School in Elk, California, after I wailed that I'd just interfered too much with students as they wrote. "Yes," Mark said. "That's always the problem. Are you going to teach or are you going to let them learn?" And, at the paradoxical same time, when in my class at San Quentin I've just repeated for the fifth time in an evening, "I mean, you don't *have* to make any changes, I'm just suggesting," Chris Brown is certainly going to say, "Don't worry, you *know* none of us is going to do what he doesn't want to do."



From the beginning of my work at San Quentin, I've met men like Elmo Chattman, whose favorite poet is Neruda and who himself writes lines like:

The rich iron ore has been extracted
From the earth of my flesh
The strip-mined wounds
still fresh
bleed black blood
liquid onyx
dark as the vision of ten blind men
sad as the souls of all lost children

or Robert Day, who writes of the wind:

When restless
He's shifting sand endless dunes
Contented, he's waving wheat yellow fields
Joyful, dancing leaves in roadside streets
Sullen, slashing snow on mountain crags
Mischievous, he's hurled sea spray
from wave to rolling wave
Yet when he's angry, really raged
he's seen in tempest storm, hurricane water
typhooned trees with lightning fingers
thunder carried on his breath

or Carl Berg, who receives an almost constant bombardment of dramatic images:

...pain and loneliness
who sing
unholy hymns
with mouths full of needle sharp teeth

and

darkness seems the time
when the attic of one's mind
is opened

or James Pettaway, who writes so sensually:

Pulled
submerged in her oceans
I can breathe water
when I'm with her

When I send out copies of our anthology, they're poems with lines like these that are most often commented on, for these are the poems that best fit one current aesthetic: they're full of images, direct language, end-stopped lines. Elmo is fortunate that his personal poetic interests and talents mesh well with the outside poetry world's tastes; he can learn from much of what he reads, and his own writing is appreciated. Robert's task is slightly more difficult because what he has to say most often does not fit into a straight-forward poem of a couple dozen lines. Robert has to find his own forms, longer forms, that allow as much for the space between what's said as they do for the lines themselves. Carl hears words fall into a syntax that isn't popular right now, but it's what he hears and the sound is rich and compelling. How can he follow his ear and still speak in a voice others will listen to? How can he welcome the abundance of images the Muse heaps on him and still shape these into a piece that feels whole? These are his poetic tasks. James

writes fine short, end-stopped lines but feels his true voice needs longer lines to speak in. He's feeling constrained by the form he's been writing in and wonders what's next.

In other words, these poets are like poets everywhere else and must find the proper form for what *they* have to say. No one form, or, even more broadly, no one aesthetic, is going to work for us all.

One of the advantages (not for the men, but for me) at San Quentin is that the inmates are usually there for a very long time. This means that I've been able to work with some of my students the whole time I've been at the prison, nearly two years. So I'm allowed to teach slowly, to take time to get to know a man's work and the nature of his particular poetic process before I try to make suggestions, bring in specific books for him to read, etc. I'm given the opportunity to learn how to hold up the mirror each man will be able to look into.

Another blessing of my work is the criteria the men themselves use to judge a poem. I always try to watch my students' response to new work. With kids, what's appreciated is often playfulness of language. With the men I've met at San Quentin, the standard is usually honesty, depth of true feeling, a poem that's raw, cold.

Integrity has been a quality of most of the poetry I've read at San Quentin. I feel integrity in these poems written a year or two ago:

A SHAKEN WORLD

My world
Your world
Our world
Who gives a fuck
as long as there is a world
 A shaken world of des-pair
and of joy
 people strolling behind
a façade wanting to be
but are not
Life is not a game
nor a stage congested with actors
 Sitting in this cage
of hell
watching life and all its harshness
go by
 images of the world
are so myopic
but far away
 by colored eyes
The simple things
All things
that are precious are
simply overlooked
Things beautiful and sweet
The perfect love
in an imperfect world...

- Spoon Jackson

CAN'T LIVE THE LIE

Few truly care
Society's nightmare
Blind ambition
Insatiable hunger
I got mine Fuck you

I see but am helpless
Want
Courage

Threaten the Beast
Risk destruction
Nurture the Beast
Know despair
Must move forward
Death is inevitable

Can't live the lie
I see but am afraid
I know not what's real

- Coties Perry

Both of these poems are concerned with important realities and each speaks in a recognizable voice, each has a style. These poems are also abstract in a way that goes against current taste, here are very recent poems by these same poets:

HOW DID I SIN?

How did i sin?
i was not born into
sin
i was born out of love

How did i sin?
i am not Adam
nor am i the apple
he bit

I've never been to Eden
Nor made love to Eve
my eyes have always been
open to see
what is and what isn't

How did i sin?
I was never cast out of
Heaven
nor have i dwelt in Hell

For i have always
been love
even when my actions
may not show it

Perhaps i do not
deserve praise
for being born
but surely i
do not deserve
blame

- Spoon Jackson

KICKIN' IT WITH LONELINESS

Here you are again
Loneliness
sneaking up on me
You've already taken my youth and freedom
now you want my life-of-the-party soul
lolligagging style
gift-of-gab
Damn you!

Back off me Loneliness!
And take your friend Emptiness with you
Who do you think you are?
Just when I'm trying to know out some z's
here you come again and make this sleepless nightmare
harder than I know how to deal with.

I'm trying my damndest to get you off my back
but you've got me pinned
Look!
You're making me hate
to communicate
with the free world
turning me into a bore
keeping me away from checking out
Hollywood on the boob-tube
and catching that Beastie beat on the air waves.

Man! I'm aware of your presence in this cell
You and your homeboys
Stillness and Nothingness
among these crowded out caged loud mouths.

Loneliness go away
I don't want you here
I'm tired of talking with you
and waiting for an unwanted answer
I'm fed up with your worthless
lifeless ass
I'd rather wash clothes and cell bars
than watch you and these four walls.

Check it out Loneliness
give me a chance
When I've got that caressing touch
the smooth flexible female body
with free will
and want of a fat joint after sex
I'll kick it with you then.

- Coties Perry

Now, to my taste, these recent poems are much better work. They are specific, detailed; I can see what's happening. Each is more sophisticated in its use of poetic techniques. The poets themselves are pleased with their writing, feel they continue to understand more and more of what's possible poetically

and to apply this to their work. So I'd have to say that what Spoon and Coties and the other poets I know at San Quentin haven chosen to learn has been helpful to them.

But, I'm told, peers often like these new poems less than they liked the older ones. Didacticism is a quality this poetic culture values, and its absence is missed in these more imagistic poems. One audience, the outside poetry world, is gained, but another might be lost. Some of the prison poets respond to this by writing poems for their peers in the cell blocks or out on the streets and other poems to share with me or in class.

I'm certainly not suggesting these poets would be better off if they'd never heard and talked with Phavia Kujichagulia or Sharon Doubiago or Kiva or Czeslaw Milosz or Ruth Gendler or Scoop Nisker or Rojelio Carlos or Wanda Coleman or Malcolm Margolin; if they'd never listened to Dawn Kolokithas talk about the Language Poets; if they'd never watched *Poetry In Motion* or a dozen other poetry videos; if they'd never read Rilke or Ginsberg or Forché or Issa. I'm not suggesting that they or their work would be better off if Floyd Salas and I weren't at San Quentin going over their own poems with them.

On reading a draft of this article, Spoon Jackson told me, "There's not a problem unless you make one up. I don't listen to you because you're an authority, but just as another human being who knows certain things. We're all adults and we'll only take what we want from what you tell us." Glenn Hill said, "I need you to tell me what you know; otherwise I'll keep writing the same kind of poem I already know how to write." I understand and appreciate what Spoon and Glenn are saying; however, I'm still left with, "yes, but..." I'm still left experiencing a dilemma, a dilemma that seems to be inherent to the nature of teaching.



One tangent to end with. It looks as though the direction of arts education, at least in the immediate future, will be less supportive of artists working in the classroom and more supportive of teachers teaching *about* art. Of course teachers are just as likely to pay attention to the imperialistic nature of education as artists and artists are just as likely to be imperialists as teachers and any human being can be addicted to the process of creation. I just hope whoever's up there in front of the class – artist, teacher, parent, principal, warden, arts administrator – will share the joys, demands and possibilities of this process of work and will recognize the limitations of any single standard of judgment.

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A 30-minute video-tape of the men at San Quentin presenting their poems, more of a poetry-video than a straight-on reading, is available for showing to classes or other groups. For information, contact Judith Tannenbaum, c/o Jim Carlson, Artist/Facilitator, Education Department, San Quentin State Prison, Tamal, CA 94964.