

Thursday, September 1, 2011

WELLS, BRADBURY AND JOHNSON



H.G. WELLS

"You see I had always anticipated that the people of the year Eight Hundred and Two Thousand odd would be incredibly in front of me in knowledge, art everything. Then one of them suddenly asked me a question that showed him to be on the intellectual level of one of our five-year-old children....I had happened upon humanity upon the wane...The Eloi, like the Carlovingian kings, had decayed to a mere beautiful futility." H.G. Wells, *The Time Machine* (1895).

"Be a credit to your race." Old Black American saying.

E. Ethelbert Miller asks: Do you have a favorite sci-fi story or movie?

In my case, the stories---literature and movies---I was exposed to in my childhood and teens had a strong impact on me and became indelibly inscribed on the emulsion of my memory. Among the science fiction stories, there are two that have scenes I've thought about for a lifetime. One is a small scene in a film half a century old now (and does not appear in the novel it is adapted from); the other is a major scene and is crucial for the resolution of the conflict in a novel. They lifted my thoughts above and beyond the mundane and pedestrian. Both were written by men who were giants in the field of speculative fiction (or one might say in literature *period*), founding fathers who defined the genre, and forever stamped their visions upon it: H.G. Wells and Ray Bradbury. In both cases these imaginative scenes are about the accumulated knowledge of the human species, its loss and preservation and, in a way, speak to our individual responsibility as the inheritors of culture and civilization. (In the best science fiction the question "What is at stake?" is always large and concerns all of humankind.) They are scenes so provocative (for me) that I can only hope to one day write in my lifetime a single scene that approaches being so powerful as a statement about our humanity.

I was 12-years-old when I first saw the George Pal film adaptation of H.G. Wells's *The Time Machine*. In that film, Wells's Time Traveler journeys to a distant future where he discovers the

remnant of humankind, the Eloi. They are young, child-like, have no government, no laws, no civilization. They spend all their time eating, drinking, swimming, dancing and playing. Later, the Time Traveler will realize the Eloi are bovine for a reason---they are cattle kept nurtured as food for a degenerate offspring of humankind called Morlocks. But before that discovery is made, the Time Traveler, eager to learn about this world of the future, fires question after question at the indifferent Eloi. He learns they have books and asks to see them. What they lead him to is the remains of a library where all the books are covered in dust and so rotted by mold they disintegrate at his touch. Naturally, the Time Traveler is enraged by the Eloi's indifference to the thousands of years humankind struggled for knowledge.



RAY BRADBURY

A similar theme appears in Ray Bradbury's most famous novel, *Fahrenheit 451* (1953). In this future dystopia, critical thinking is considered dangerous and books are burned by "fireman," one of whom is the protagonist Guy Montag. Again, this is a fictional future (present?) world where the populace is hedonistic and anti-intellectual, a dystopia that is also steeped in violence much like the riots we saw this summer in the U.K. It is a place the protagonist eventually escapes from, and away from the city he discovers book-lovers who defy the state (or status quo) by memorizing---like griots---the entire contents of great books, which they preserve and transmit in a new oral tradition. (That recent movie, "The Book of Eli," borrows this idea for its conclusion.) In his interviews and prefaces for later editions of this work, Bradbury says repeatedly that it was television that led in his future world to a lack of interest in books. (As a footnote, I remember reading once that Bradbury wrote this work in two weeks on a typewriter he rented at a library. That may be apocryphal, but I love that story.)

We all have Eloi in our lives. We find them among are our friends and relatives. They are members of the general public, as Andrew Ferguson wrote in 2004, "people whose sensibilities incline towards images and sounds rather than words on paper." They are our colleagues and coworkers who *do* read but censor texts for reasons of religious or political orthodoxy. And they have been around forever. We find them in the American colonies, in Hitler's book-burning

"firemen," in Mao's China, and the Muslim world. The tragedy here, one that sickens me to think about, is that the destruction (or loss) of the knowledge that is our human inheritance is literally the willful destruction of *others*---the products of their minds and spirits---who preceded us and struggled so hard for that knowledge. To burn a book is criminal; but to have no knowledge of that work's existence, or to be indifferent to it and its importance, is an act of annihilation just as egregious as book burning.

What struck me about the two scenes I saw in these films when I was twelve and later in my teens was the lasting feeling that I, you, each of us, and every citizen, have a responsibility in regard to the culture and civilization that sustained and enriched our lives. Like Bradbury's griots, we---as civilized people---must embody in some way, large or small, the best our predecessors have left us, as the young African boy does in my story "The Transmission" in *Soulcatcher and Other Stories*. Back in the 1950s, responsible and wise black parents counseled their children to "Be a credit to your race." By the 60s, my artist's tendency to revise things led me to kick that saying up a notch in a new formulation: *Be a credit to the human race*, i.,e., our entire species. Civilizations can perish in a single generation. They can only be sustained if members of each generation take upon themselves the representation in their lives of the best that civilization has to offer. This is, of course, the labor of a lifetime. It is a daunting, daily responsibility. (To *not* become an Eloi.) A never-ending duty from childhood to crypt. But as JFK once asked:

If not us, then who?
If not now, then when?

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at [3:22 AM](#)
<http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/09/wells-bradbury-and-johnson.html>

Thursday, September 1, 2011

SAYING HELLO TO THE ELEPHANTS AGAIN

E. Ethelbert Miller asks: "Buddhism seems to embrace change. How has your writing changed over the years? Might you reach a point where there is no need to write and you replace your computer with a small flute?"

It's highly unlikely you'll ever see me wandering around in a robe and playing a flute. But I've joked with my family since my 1997 trip to Thailand that maybe one day I'll go back there to join a monastery and ride elephants again. (See photo below.)

On a more serious note, what Buddhist practice helped me do is take an attitude of non-attachment toward my work. Earlier in my life, especially in my teens, I was obsessed with publishing. These days I still publish a lot, but whenever I finish something new, "I'll let go" of that work and turn immediately to my next assignment; or, if I'm between assignments (which is rare), I go back to a regular workout schedule, and study (philosophy, Buddhist writings, Sanskrit). Daily practice helped me long ago to separate the vanity-drenched ego from what I do. It also taught me how to have no expectations for the work and devote myself completely to the joy of the creative process (which is all about problem-solving, and exercising a skill learned over many decades, which in itself is pleasurable), deriving all my fulfillment, sense of "reward," and personal gratification from just doing the work to the best of my ability at a particular moment in time. I know the value of what I've done and do. I don't need any outside or external validation for that. My sense of "I," as a Buddhist---who and what I am---is not tied up with my creative work when it leaves my hands. And after it leaves my study, I tend to forget about it so that I can move on to the next project. Every Buddhist is acutely aware of change and impermanence.

Movement is the essence of the universe. So for an *upasaka* (lay follower) like myself, I try never to feel too high when things are "good" (as the world judges such things) or too low when things are "bad." That kind of yo-yoing up and down has never appealed to me. Few "professions" put pressure on the ego to quite the degree that the arts do in America. Far too many artists invest their sense of identity and self-worth in the popularity or reception or worldly "success" of their work. As a Dharma follower, I see the ego, self and "I" as illusory constructs. So there is no static or essential (in the sense of an essence or unchanging substance) "identity" to interfere with my total immersion in an in-progress work. That's why Reb the Coffinmaker in *Oxherding Tale* says, "I didn't *do* anything. Things are done, that's all." I create because it's fun to do so. Period.

For these reasons I strongly recommend the practice of meditation to everyone involved in the arts.



Posted by Ethelbert Miller at [4:07 AM](#)

<http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/09/saying-hello-to-elephants-again.html>

Saturday, September 3, 2011

ELLISON AS REMIX?

E. Ethelbert Miller asks: "I'm looking at a thesis outline by a student enrolled in graduate school (at Howard). The student is looking at the work of Percival Everett. One of the books she will be writing about is ERASURE. I love this book. But the student wants to connect Everett's concept of "erasure" to Ellison's idea of invisibility. My question to you is - must we always look to Ellison when we discuss invisibility and questions of identity? Are there other African American writers this person can look to? It just seems as if we keep looking in the same box and pulling out the same old clothes."



PERCIVAL EVERETT

As a retired college professor, I think it would be a mistake for this student to not mention (or "erase," if you will) Ellison's contribution to literary culture if she feels it significantly relates to Percival Everett's work, especially if she believes Everett is indebted to Ellison for the presentation of a particular idea. This student isn't writing a book review. She's writing a thesis in which she will ideally offer "new knowledge" or insight about some subject. Such a reference to Ellison, then, is simply a matter of integrity in scholarship and completeness and, I might add, honesty. Furthermore, if this is a thesis, I imagine this student will (or should) make an effort to situate Mr. Everett's work within the context of American literature in general and black American literary history in particular. In other words, I can see her "connecting" him to many people, perhaps even to E. Ethelbert Miller. No literary work enters the world *ex nihilo*.

For me this is a curious question. The sort of reference to Ellison's classic novel that we're talking about does not in any way reduce or diminish whatever objective, demonstrable, artistic achievements there might be in *Erasure*. If a writer (or a scientist) has been the first to explore an idea or certain dramatic territory, why in the world would we wish not to acknowledge that? And to do so with appreciation for the shoulders of the giants that we stand upon? (In the case of Ellison, his exploration of the trope of racial "invisibility" is so exhaustive and perfectly rendered that, to quote Tim Kreider, "there's no point in trying to rephrase it yourself—in the future, you just allude to that work of art, as when we call someone a Don Quixote or say it was a *Rashomon* situation".) Can you imagine a philosopher today presenting the idea that the ever changing world of things we experience is based on another changeless world of forms that they imperfectly "participate" in and no one pointing out that Plato expressed that idea elegantly and memorably first (and possibly was inspired by the philosophical positions of Heraclitus and

Parmenides)? Or can you imagine discussing the special theory of relativity and not citing or referring to Einstein?

In *Wisdom of the West*, Bertrand Russell wrote that, "The point of looking at the history of philosophy lies in the recognition that most questions have been asked before, and that some intelligent answers to them have been given in the past."

Why should matters be any different for literature? For example, in a recent post, I talked about H.G. Wells's *The Time Machine*. If memory serves, other authors wrote imaginative stories about time travel, but Wells was the first to do so using a *machine*. Personally, I would be disappointed if a graduate student writing about *Middle Passage* failed to mention its intentional references to Apollonius of Rhodes's *The Argonautica*, Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* and "Benito Cereno," and Jack London's *The Sea Wolf*, to mention just a couple of works that made this novel possible.

I strongly recommend that E-Channel readers watch the three entertaining short films entitled "Everything Is A Remix," which can be viewed at <http://www.everythingisaremix.info/watch-the-series/#>; Or click on this link [Watch | Everything Is a Remix](#). After viewing these comparisons in the fields of music, movies and computers you will never be able to look again at George Lucas's "Star Wars" or Quentin Tarantino's "Kill Bill" without seeing the numerous quotations (images or ideas) that they, as serious film students, include from other movies. I rather suspect that we look to scholars, and especially to historians, of fiction and film to help us identify such important literary and intellectual antecedents.

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at [12:14 AM](#)
<http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/09/ellison-as-remix.html>

Saturday, September 3, 2011

TELLING IT LONG AND TELLING IT SHORT

E. Ethelbert Millers asks: "In your fiction writing you seem to prefer the longer sentence over the short one. Is this for sound, content, or simply you as author following the flow of the narrative you created? Are you aware of sentence length? Would you consider this your style?"

OK, you got me. I surrender. I confess:

If I don't control myself, my sentences in literary fiction naturally tend to run long, with image and idea building upon image and idea, rolling and ribboning out, sometimes twisting and torquing dialectically, from thesis to antithesis, and spiced with colons and semi-colons and parenthetical asides (such as this) until I simply can't pack any more into them. I've always seen the sentence and paragraph as units of energy to be released. So yes, I use long sentences for rhythm and music. I most certainly would always follow one with a short sentence. As I used to teach my students, the technique here is take the simple sentence, then "complicate" (*i.e.*, extend) the subject, the verb, then the object.



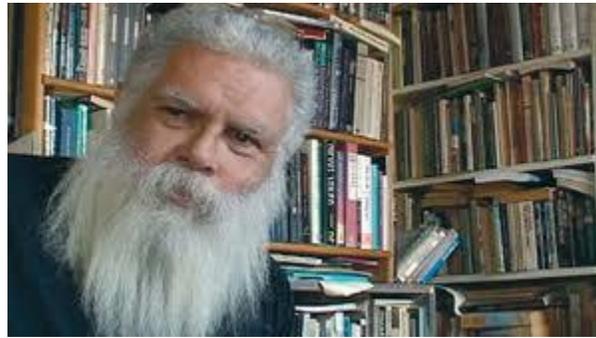
DYLAN THOMAS

To be frank, I think the elegant, long sentence is a thing of beauty. A self-contained entity worthy of study all by itself. Consider this sentence by Dylan Thomas from *Quite Early One Morning*:

"I was born in a large Welsh town at the beginning of the Great War---an ugly, lovely town (or so it was and is to me), crawling, sprawling by a long and splendid curving shore where truant boys and sandfield boys and old men from nowhere, beachcombed, idled and paddled, watched the dock-bound ships or the ships streaming away into wonder and India, magic and China, countries bright with oranges and loud with lions; threw stones into the sea for the barking outcast dogs; made castles and forts and harbours and race tracks in the sand; and on Saturday afternoons listened to the brass band, watched the Punch and Judy, or hung about on the fringes of the crowd to hear the fierce religious speakers who shouted at the sea, as though it were wicked and wrong to roll in and out like that, white-horsed and full of fishes."

In *Copy and Compose: A Guide to Prose Style* (Prentice-Hall, 1969), the editors Winston Weathers and Otis Winchester say this about Thomas's "master sentence":

"In this magnificent sentence, loose and long, constituting an entire paragraph, great use is made of details placed in various forms of the series. After the initial statement the sentence proceeds descriptively, using double adjectives in front of nouns---'ugly, lovely town'---and double participles after the noun---'crawling, sprawling'---along with many instances of balance---'so it was and is to me,' 'long and splendid,' 'idled and paddled,' and 'bright with oranges and loud with lions.' Note also the four-part series used: 'castles and forts and harbours and race tracks.' In the sentence abundant use is also made of sound devices: alliteration---'wicked and wrong'---and rhyme---'crawling, sprawling.' And you will note the terminal rhythm of the sentence, after the long sweep of clauses and phrases: 'as though it were wicked and wrong to roll in and out like that, white-horsed and full of fishes,' with 'white-horsed' a repositioned adjective, acting as a brake on the rhythmical flow."



SAMUEL DELANY

We find the same detail and description, the same careful layering that is the result of much revision, and the same attention to balanced construction in the following sentence from Samuel Delany's *Flight from Nevèryön*:

"No doubt in the palace his rough, if scarred good looks would cause (he dreamed) a few noble ladies to catch their breath; and perhaps even once, at some great party, into which he'd wandered only by accident, he'd exchange a few lines of banter with the Child Empress herself, whose reign is glittering and glorious, causing waves of jealousy and ire among the lords gathered at the affair, so that, after a month or so of such dalliance, his patroness (who by this time, would hopefully have taken up another lover, perhaps a young nobleman whose arrogant ways would make her fondly recall her nights and noons with him) would finally secure him an officer's commission in the Imperial Army, at some fascinating outpost in some exotic mountain hold, sending him on to who-knows-what great and gainful adventures..."

No creative writing student escaped my workshops for 33 years without doing as one of their many exercises master sentences like the ones above.

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at [6:08 AM](#)

<http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/09/telling-it-long-and-telling-it-short.html>

Tuesday, September 6, 2011

ONE MINUTE PAST MIDNIGHT: Time for another bedtime story by Charles Johnson



I just finished after a month of work (all of August) a new sci-fi story, entitled "One Minute Past Midnight," for the yearly Bedtime Stories fund-raiser to be held by Humanities Washington on September 30. This is the 13th year for this event, one I've written a new story for every year since 1999, and all these stories have been published, five of them appearing in my third story collection, *Dr. King's Refrigerator and Other Bedtime Stories* (Scribner, 2005). The other writers participating this fall are Jamie Ford, Stephanie Kallos, Jim Lynch, and my former UW colleague, poet Heather McHugh, a recent recipient of a MacArthur fellowship.

Each year the writers featured at this event compose a new story based on a topic, theme or "prompt" related in some way to "bedtime" and given to us by the board of directors for Humanities Washington in the spring. Twenty-one previous works from this event were published last year in *Nightlights: Stories & Essays from Northwest Authors*, edited by Julie Ziegler, the executive director at Humanities Washington, and containing my foreword. (The book is available from Amazon or Humanities Washington.)

This year the topic was "12:01." Over the weekend I passed a late draft of my story by two writer/teacher friends in California and Connecticut for their reaction and comments. They gave me some very good suggestions, and yesterday I incorporated them into the final draft for the story. I'd like to say more about "One Minute Past Midnight," but it has two surprise endings, something I've not attempted before, and I don't want to spoil the experience of the story for future readers.

However, I can offer a sample from the story's opening:

This was the first night Ethan Bean had taken his boss, Jessica Sweeney, to dinner at the Palace Kitchen in Belltown. He chose that Tom Douglas restaurant based on its good reviews and the fact that it stayed open until 2 AM, which was convenient because if you were a visitor and arrived in Seattle late, hungry and tired, or if you were like Ethan and Jessica, who were both young scientists and usually had to work off the clock, you were thankful for a place like the

Palace Kitchen. Groups of workers downtown drifted there on week nights like this one, a warm evening in late August. True enough, it was crowded and noisy at 9 PM when they arrived, but they were seated quickly. Ethan noticed that the walls felt warm and welcoming, and there was an open kitchen with an applewood grill you could smell as soon you walked through the front door. He knew Jessica was a foodie, so Ethan hoped she would enjoy this experience and maybe give him his first goodnight kiss. And, more than anything else, Ethan hoped that tonight, after a day of wall-to-wall work, she would not do to him what she'd done on every one of their previous dinner dates.

He was certain she could see by now that he was in love with her. But for reasons she never explained, Jessica always had to be back at their workplace before midnight. With her being his boss, he was reluctant to press her for an explanation, but it did make him wonder: Did she sleep there? Or did she end their evenings together early in order to keep the proper distance between employees of different rank? He didn't have a cross-eyed guess, and so he wondered just how much *did* he really know about her?

Despite this mystery he couldn't unriddle, which would end this evening, although Ethan didn't know that, of this much he was certain:

Six months ago, Jessica had taken him under her protective wing as her assistant and protégé when he started work at Prometheus Labs in West Seattle, and he, a person who was always a bit awkward in social situations, was profoundly grateful for her guidance and companionship. She was a thirty-year-old MacArthur fellow, who studied Tibetan Buddhism at Sakya Monastery in Greenwood, took lessons at the Eight Limbs Yoga center in Wedgwood, and held doctorate degrees in both computer science and developmental psychology. Added to which, and most important of all, she was the lead scientist in their division. In other words, she was directing their latest project, which was duplicating the work of Dr. Craig Venter, whose institute in California created the first artificial, synthetic cell, one capable of self-replicating.

By contrast, Ethan, was twenty-five, and had yet to find the time for a hobby since he was fresh out of M.I.T. with post-doc work at Amyris Biotechnologies in Emeryville California, where he'd devoted his time to molecular biology. His I.Q. was north of 160. Some of the technicians at Prometheus Labs saw him as being a team player, and said so on their performance evaluations. Others felt he was naïf, too square and humorless, a complaint that rankled him. And a few thought he was maybe even a little stuck on himself, thinking he was cute because he had a classic, round baby face with full lips and chuffy cheeks, a large forehead, and big ears on either side of his large, top-heavy head. But always Jessica defended him against his detractors. She had a reason for doing that, which was the fact that they worked so well together as a duo, like Tycho Brahe and Johann Kepler, his strength being careful observation and compiling empirical data while she had the kind of mind that made big conceptual connections. He simply had never felt such compatibility with another person. She was everything he wanted in a woman--- someone who had none of his defects and possessed all the virtues he lacked, and normally that would have made someone as logical as Ethan wonder why in the world she would want *him*. But a coworker had confided in him that Jessica called him Mr. Right and a "keeper" when he wasn't around. That made his spirits soar. At Prometheus Labs, she seemed to be the only one who understood his schoolboy shyness and recognized that what he so woefully lacked in social skills he more than made up for by being a tireless worker like herself. Sometimes she even

mothered him, pinching lint off his jacket and from his hair. He felt he could tell her anything. So why was she so secretive about her midnight disappearances?

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at [12:51 AM](#)

<http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/09/one-minute-past-midnight-time-for.html>

Thursday, September 8, 2011

THE CHARLES JOHNSON SOCIETY: Are you now or have you ever been...

You can't have high standards of scholarship without having a high standard of integrity, because the essence of scholarship is truth. Dr. John Hope Franklin

According to its mission statement, "On May 23, 2003, the Charles Johnson Society was founded at the annual conference for the American Literature Association in Cambridge, Massachusetts. The Society's goal is to stimulate and encourage interest in philosophical fiction---in particular the works of Charles Johnson---through annual meetings, a web site, a newsletter, and other activities."

The CJ Society has held its annual meetings at ALA in Boston and San Francisco. Whenever the officers of the Society---Linda Furgerson Selzer, John Whalen-Bridge, Gary Storhoff, Marc Conner, and William Nash---gather on the west coast, I try to attend the sessions, soak up their presentations, and just enjoy their company, for as a group they are among the most generous, hard-working, inter-disciplinary, productive, and brilliant literary scholars that I've had the pleasure and privilege of knowing during my 33 years in higher education. And, as you will see in a moment, their research, teaching and publications are not limited by any means to my work. Rather, their current projects cover a wide, ever-expanding and fascinating range of explorations into black American literature and culture, other Western canonical authors, and also Asian philosophy.

John Whalen-Bridge (JWB), an Associate Professor at the National University of Singapore, cut through all the bureaucratic red-tape required for establishing the CJ Society (he has served as president), and he also helped create the Norman Mailer Society. With Gary Storhoff, an Associate Professor of English at the University of Connecticut at Stamford, he serves as editor for the SUNY series in Buddhism and American Culture. The works they have published so far are seminal and include *The Emergence of Buddhist American Literature*; *American Buddhism as a Way of Life*; and *Writing as Enlightenment: Buddhist American Literature into the Twenty-first Century*. A high-ranking and life-long practitioner of the martial arts, JWB has also edited with D.S. Farrer the forthcoming book *Martial Arts as Embodied Knowledge: Asian Traditions in a Transnational World*.

Linda Furgerson Selzer, who holds advanced degrees in philosophy and literature, is Society treasurer and an Associate Professor at the Pennsylvania State University. She is at work on a book entitled *Black Authorship in the Digital Age*. Her recent articles include "Black American Buddhism: History and Representation" in JWB's and Storhoff's *Writing as Enlightenment*; "Figuring the Black Body: Obama and the 2008 Election" in MELUS; and an article on Colson Whitehead's novel *The Intuitionist* in *African American Review* as well as a forthcoming article entitled "The Digital Public Sphere and Black Life Writing."

Former Society president William Nash, Professor of American literature and civilization at Middlebury College, describes his latest research this way:

"My new research focuses on the imaginative geography of the 'ghetto' landscapes of Chicago. By 'imaginative geography' I mean 'representations of place, space and landscape that structure people's understandings of the world, and in turn help shape their actions.' As I consider the imaginative geography of Chicago's African American community, first as 'ghetto' and later, more specifically as 'the projects,' I am interested in looking at cultural artifacts that I thought contributed significantly to the construction of what I'd say is a national misconception of urban African America. *Native Son* is, of course, a great example of this sort of artifact.

"Against that background of iconic texts like *Native Son*," Nash continues, "I have been looking for artists and writers whose work countered or at least complicated these ideas, whose work challenged the power imbalance inherent in the construction of space that I've been talking about. This turns around the geographical concept of 'thirdspace.' For artists, acting in thirdspace means appropriating geographies that were made for one purpose and redefining and occupying them as strategic (real or symbolic) locations. This becomes a means of reclaiming and reframing the idea of urban African America as more than a place of suffering, victimization, and despair (a la Wright in *Native Son* and the 'hood films of the 1990s). The Chicago sections of *Dreamer* certainly fit this description. I'm also interested in the work of visual artist Kerry James Marshall and a range of popular musicians from the late 60s to the present whose work complicates our ideas of the 'ghetto'."

And last, but certainly not least, is Marc Conner, Professor of English at Washington and Lee University. Like JWB, Conner is a martial artist who will test in two weeks for his 4th degree black belt in American Freestyle Karate; he also has a second degree black belt in Shotokan karate, and teaches at the Lexington Karate School. An indefatigable teacher and scholar, Conner, secretary of the Society, is the author of the forthcoming book *The Poetry of James Joyce Reconsidered*, which will be published in 2012. With scholar and novelist John Callahan (his first novel is *A Man You Could Love*), who is the Morgan S. Odell professor of humanities at Lewis and Clark College in Portland, Oregon and literary executor for the estate of Ralph Ellison, Conner is at work on *The Selected Letters of Ralph Ellison*. And just as JWB did in 2003 with the CJ Society, Conner this past year shepherded into existence the long overdue Ralph Ellison Society.

It's clear, I think, that the officers of the CJ Society are enriching American (and world) literary culture in ways both numerous and diverse, and setting---in the spirit of John Hope Franklin's statement in the above epigraph---a very high standard for others to follow. I consider it a blessing to be in regular conversation with each and every one of them, and look forward eagerly to learning from their latest works.



Posted by Ethelbert Miller at [4:28 AM](#)

<http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/09/charles-johnson-society-are-you-now-or.html>

Sunday, September 11, 2011

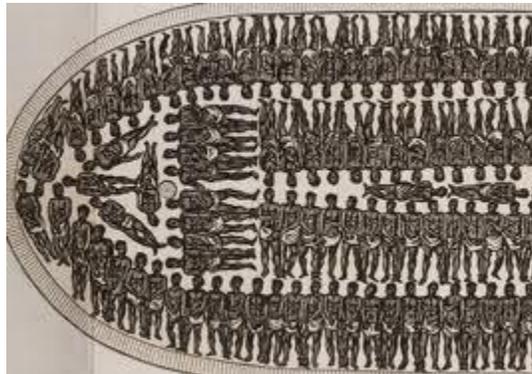
THE MAN IN THE MIDDLE OF THE MIDDLE PASSAGE

There's many a bestseller that could have been prevented by a good teacher. Flannery O'Connor

Over the years, and on several occasions, I've mentioned how in 1971 when I was 23-years-old I wrote an early draft of the novel *Middle Passage* that I set aside because I considered it to be unsuccessful. That naturally raises the question, why did I feel it failed? Allow me to use today's E-Channel post to provide a full reply to that question.

In 1969 black students at my undergraduate college took on, in addition to their load of regular coursework, the creation of the first Black Studies classes on our campus. At that time, there were no black professors to offer such a curriculum. So black graduate students from different departments--history, philosophy, sociology---assumed the roles of lecturers. My friend Tom Slaughter, who was then a black graduate student in Philosophy and later earned his Ph.D. in that field when we were doctoral students at SUNY Stony Brook (philosopher Don Ihde directed both our dissertations), was one of those young lecturers, and it was he who got me involved. A handful of undergraduates were trained to lead weekly discussion groups, myself among them.

I recall seriously neglecting my official spring courses to prepare for leading my small discussion group of fellow students. I studied, for eight hours a day, John Hope Franklin's massive, ground-breaking *From Slavery to Freedom* because it contained everything about black American history that I had not been told about in integrated elementary and secondary schools in Evanston, Illinois. This was an alternate curriculum, a creatively assembled crash course that began to answer my questions about the history and contributions of people of African descent to the world---knowledge that was truly liberating, personal, and completely unknown to the white students sitting beside me in my official classes.



During that year, one of the black graduate students in history placed on the overhead projector a cross-section of a slave ship: the now famous image of Africans crammed "spoon-fashion" into the hold. That image, which hitherto I had not seen (or, if so, never so powerfully), burned itself into my mind. Sitting in a sea of about 300 students, I knew that some day (I knew not when) and somehow (I knew not how) I had to extensively research and dramatize what those unnamed and unvoiced black people squeezed like cattle into the belly of a European slaver endured on their

journey to the West. This need was not merely academic. It was visceral, as profoundly personal and urgent as scholarship and art can be.

So for a class in black history I took later with a visiting black professor from the St. Louis, Missouri area, I began my research on the Atlantic slave trade, using that material first for my term paper for that class, then as the basis for a novel.

But you have to remember, in 1971, I'd been seriously writing fiction for just a year. This was the period (1970-72) when I trained myself to produce 10 pages of fiction a day, five days a week, and completed the draft for a novel every 10 weeks (or every academic quarter), which resulted in six novels finished by the fall of 1972 when I began the seventh one, *Faith and the Good Thing*, with writer John Gardner looking over my shoulder.

In all honesty I have to say that I began that first draft of *Middle Passage* too early in my novel-writing career. Put simply, pulling off everything that novel required was above my pay-grade when I was 23-years-old. The problems it had were both conceptual and in terms of execution. It was written too quickly, and before I was skillful with such matters as narrative voice, formal variations, and the poetic possibilities of literary prose. Furthermore, my research at the time led me to narratives written by white slave ship captains. That was the correct choice for literary form, *i.e.*, a slave ship's log. But in my earliest version of *Middle Passage* the log is also kept by a white captain (Imagine the novel you know being narrated in first-person by Capt. Ebenezer Falcon). That fictitious slave ship captain was simply never able to understand and identify fully with the Africans in the hold of his ship. They remained chattel for him, not people.

Therefore, I put that draft away, turned to writing other novels and stories between 1972 and 1983, doing a great deal more research into slavery along the way for *Oxherding Tale* (where I developed some crucial strategies I would use again later in *Middle Passage*, *i.e.*, how do I create a protagonist/narrative who is a highly educated slave, and how do I make the antebellum world speak to contemporary issues of race and culture), and developed more fully my skills as a technician of language and form. By the time I returned to that story in 1983, its protagonist, the person keeping the ship's log for *The Republic*, was Rutherford Calhoun, a free black man. A more roguish version (or picaresque) of the more genteel Andrew Hawkins in *Oxherding Tale*. Unlike the white captain in the early draft, he is a black American who completely understands the white crew, the Western world *and* is positioned to embrace and be transformed by his experience with the Africans taken on board: the Allmuseri, the most spiritually advanced tribe on this planet. For Rutherford, then, the middle passage becomes a spiritual odyssey and a meditation on the question, "Where is home?"

In contrast to the novel's 1971 draft, the one written between 1983 and 1989 provided the kind of multi-leveled "ground situation" that allowed for greater complexity and the exploration of many philosophical questions. That's the kind of fertile situation I always need when I write a novel: a plot (the writer's equivalent to the philosopher's argument, as John Gardner once put it), and characters so potentially rich that I can invest in them all my own burning intellectual and emotional concerns during the time of the book's composition. I always write *every* novel as if it is the *last* thing I will ever write or say, a kind of literary Last Will and Testament, or summing up of everything I think, feel, believe, and know at a particular moment in my life. I write it as if I might be fatally hit by a car right after taking the manuscript to the post office. (For that reason,

every novel I've published since 1974 exhausts me, and is a kind of emptying out of my entire life onto the page.) Fortunately, the draft of *Middle Passage* written in the 1980s was capacious enough for me to realize those goals.

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at [5:34 PM](#)

<http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/09/trapped-in-middle.html>

Tuesday, September 13, 2011

THE CREATIVE WRITING TEACHER AS SOUL CATCHER

"Most creative-writing teachers have had the experience of occasionally helping to produce, by accident, a pornographer." John Gardner, *The Art of Fiction*.

During my 30-plus years of teaching creative writing students, graduate and undergraduate, I never told anyone that he or she lacked talent, imagination, or that they were wasting their time. Obviously, some did lack talent and imagination. Some were wasting their time. But in principle, I always considered it wrong to discourage anyone. Who can predict if the student performing poorly in a workshop today might in five or ten years blossom into a first-rate practitioner of literary fiction? Or a best-selling writer of industrial fiction? And there is also this to say: even if such a young writer (and we all know that twentysomething young writers notoriously are lacking in the kind of worldly experience that is the basis for good storytelling) didn't one day write well, English professors console themselves, rightly or wrongly, with the hope that the young writer will emerge from a creative writing workshop as a more critical reader, someone who better understands the creative process behind the works of writers they admire or love.

But having said that, I have to say in all honesty that over three decades I sometimes had in my classroom students whose sanity was questionable. Every creative writing teacher I've known has had such students. For example, my former colleague at the University of Washington, poet David Wagoner, tells of once having serial killer Ted Bundy in one of his workshops. To paraphrase something once said by John Gardner (a quote I unsuccessfully spent an hour trying to track down), we sometimes run into a student who doesn't so much need to work on his or her craft but rather should first work on the condition of his or her *soul*.

On the first day of my classes, I told students that I cared less about *what* they wrote (that was up to them) than *how* they wrote it; *but* I also urged them to immediately begin reading Gardner's *The Art of Fiction*, where he states that, "On reflection we see that the great writer's authority consists of two elements. The first we may call, loosely, his sane humanness; that is, his trustworthiness as a judge of things, a stability rooted in the sum of those complex qualities of his character and personality (wisdom, generosity, compassion, strength of will) to which we respond, as we respond to what is best in our friends, with instant recognition and admiration, saying, 'Yes, you're right, that's how it is!' (The second element for JG is the writer's trust in his or her own aesthetic judgments and instincts.) I also made them reflect on these words from JG's literary manifesto, *On Moral Fiction*:

"Clearly no absolute standard for sanity and stability exists, but rough estimates are possible. If a writer regularly scorns all life bitterly, scorning love, scorning loyalty, scorning decency (according to some standard)---or, to put it another way, if some writer's every remark strikes most or many readers as unfair, cruel, stupid, self-regarding, ignorant, or mad; if he has no good to say of anything or anyone except the character who seems to represent himself; if he can find no pleasure in what happy human beings have found good for centuries (children and dogs, God, peace, wealth, comfort, love, hope, and faith)---then it is safe to hazard that he has not made a serious effort to sympathize and understand..."

Despite all that emphasis on "moral fiction" in my workshops, I found it strange to discover how many of my bright male students were eager to write novels that were rather perverse variations on either Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* (grown men lusting in their stories after 15-year-old girls) or John Fowles's *The Collector* (grown men imprisoning young women for the purpose of sexual exploitation). Some wrote a combination of those storylines---Lolitas imprisoned for sexual exploitation. And there were always the young female students who wrote unpublishable stories about saintly women who were driven to murder their abusive, despicable husbands, or arranged to have them beaten to a bloody pulp.

I remember one student in my last class before I retired writing a first-person story where the narrator/protagonist was a serial killer. Decades ago, when on a visit to the writing program at another university, I was forewarned about a white student I would have in my class who was convinced he was black. (Hip hop "ghetto" black, mind you, not black like W.E.B. Du Bois or Gordon Parks.) In one of my own evening novel-writing classes at UW, a black male student in his 40s, one who was trying to self-publish his fiction, decided he was dissatisfied with the descriptive passages in the work of his peers that particular night and, without warning, jumped up from his seat and began to demonstrate the ways different people, male and female, happy or sad, might walk across a room. (Another student chastised him for that impromptu, class-disrupting, theatrical outburst before I could get over my state of shock and speechlessness.) And it will probably take me several reincarnations to forget the young woman, a fundamentalist Christian, who wrote about gay gang-rape in Sodom before the Almighty destroyed that Old Testament city.

In the mildest bad case scenarios, a writing teacher must deal with students who rather than striving to simply tell a good, entertaining story instead use the occasion of their fiction to subject their teacher and fellow students to their personal problems and neuroses. (One of my former chairmen once told me he suspected creative writing classes were so popular on campus because it is only in those classes that a student gets the personal attention they crave. This isn't physics. These aren't lit courses where one is studying Shakespeare. Instead, they are the only classes on campus where the students's feelings and personalities are the subject matter.) But in a handful of cases the things I saw in student stories ranged from the eccentric to the bizarre to the borderline schizophrenic. When I was at UW it was briefly possible on the undergraduate level to weed out students who might potentially become a problem if a creative writing professor was willing to request and read during, say winter term, samples of writing by students who wanted to enter his workshop scheduled for the spring. However, that practice soon ended because students were afraid to submit a sample of their work and sought instead to get into sections of the class where the professor didn't ask to see their work before admitting them into class.

Is there a solution for any of this? If there is, I suspect it lies in the direction of the creative writing teacher practicing patience and compassion toward his or her most troublesome students, taking them aside and in private explaining why some readers will find what they have put on the page to be offensive, and maybe even alarming. As much as some of us with a background in philosophy would like to believe that everyone is endowed with reason, the truth---at least in terms of my experience---is that everyone we meet is on a different level of emotional, intellectual, and moral maturity and development. Why should it be different in the classroom? And I'm always reminded of a telling statement once made by spiritual teacher Eknath Easwaran: Each individual we meet during the course of our day is at any given

moment most likely emerging *from* a state of depression, is already *in* a state of depression, or is just about to *enter* a state of depression. A sensitive teacher always keeps that in mind.

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at [2:42 AM](#)

<http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/09/creative-writing-teacher-as-soul.html>

Wednesday, September 14, 2011

CHARLES JOHNSON IS MILES AHEAD. Wouldn't you say, mate?

E. Ethelbert Miller asks: Miles Davis was always looking ahead. Do you often go back and read your old fiction? Do you go back and revise things that are published? Do you read your fiction aloud when composing? If so, how might this change what you've written on the page?



MILES DAVIS

The answer for today's first two questions is, "No." And for the last two, "Yes." I've been publishing stories and drawings for 44 years. When a work is first published, I look over it, but I have to very quickly forget about it. In other words, I have to get it out of my head because the in-progress work currently on my desk requires that I try to maintain what Buddhists call "beginner's mind." In order to create something fresh, I do my best to forget about previous performances. This practice can often lead to moments that startle me when old work re-enters my life. For example, I did a speaking engagement at a California school a couple of years ago. The gentleman who introduced me quoted from an important passage in my short story "The Sorcerer's Apprentice," then from another paragraph in *Middle Passage*. The material he read was written 30 and 26 years ago. I felt almost as if I was listening to the work of a stranger. Why was that? Well, I'll tell you why.

Jean-Paul Sartre once said something about writing and writers that I know to be true in my own experience. He said it takes about 20 years for a writer to be able to experience his own work the way a reader experiences it. Shortly after a work is written or published, all a writer sees----all that *I* see---are my own decisions on the page. I look at a passage and I think about its earlier drafts, what I took out, and the various options or approaches that were before me during the creative process, ones that I rejected or decided not to pursue. But after 20 years a writer forgets all that "back story" for what he is reading. The prose is in a certain way more opaque. I no longer see my own mind at work---only the meaning that the words window onto. At that California school, as my host was reading from older works, I thought to myself, "Did *I* write that? Hey, that's damned good." On the other hand, when I've had the occasion to look again at some passages in *Faith and the Good Thing*, I've wondered, "What in the world does *that* statement mean? What was I thinking?" Honestly, after so many decades, I sometimes don't have a cross-eyed clue and find myself in that innocent position of the reader who encounters something for the first time.

As for reading aloud when I'm writing, I *always* do that. My wife will step into my study when I'm working and see me silently mouthing sentences as I write them. Or if my lips aren't moving, I'm hearing the music or lack of music in my head as I'm composing. And if the rhythm, meter or music isn't there, then I'm revising words and playing with sentence forms, draft after draft, to increase its musicality. Even adding a word or sentence simply for the sake of sound if the beat of a line requires that.

Here's a confession: Sometimes when I do radio interviews, my host will request that I read a particular passage that he or she likes. But I can't *do* that well if I haven't *tested* that particular passage for a reading performance, *i.e.* test-read it several times to determine (as an actor would determine with a script before him) where it speeds up and slows down. Where the silences are. And the words that require a particular emphasis or that I want to put a spin on through pronunciation. I can read Chapter One of *Middle Passage* or the Prologue for *Dreamer* in my sleep since I've performed them hundreds of times before microphones in America, Europe, and Asia, and in every imaginable acoustic situation. The same is true for the story "Dr. King's Refrigerator." I can sing sections of those works the way Mick Jagger does "Sympathy for the Devil." Or the way Aretha would belt out "Respect."

Before September 30, for example, I'll take the new sci-fi story I finished writing a little over a week ago, "One Minute Past Midnight," close my study door, and read it aloud over and over, checking for the words or sentences that make my tongue stumble, revising them so they read more smoothly, and experimenting with how I want to render the voices (dialogue) for Ethan Bean and Jessica Sweeney, the story's two principle characters. A minor character has a bloody Cockney accent, which will be fun to play with, wouldn't you say, mate?

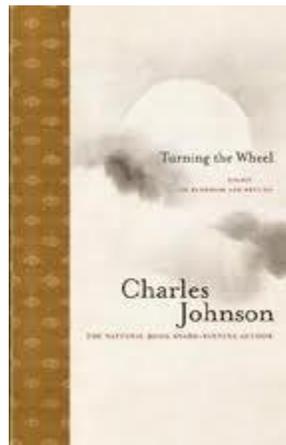
Posted by Ethelbert Miller at [11:09 PM](#)

<http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/09/charles-johnson-is-miles-ahead-wouldnt.html>

Friday, September 16, 2011

TELL ME A GOOD ESSAY

E. Ethelbert Miller asks: "Let's talk about the essay form. What makes for a good essay? Where have the ideas for your essays come from? Do people (magazines/newspapers) request them? Have you been moved to write an essay because of something that you've read or an event in your life? What is the relationship between the essay form and black intellectual thought? Who do you admire or respect when it comes to the essay writer? What is a good length for an essay? What role might philosophy play in shaping the content of an essay?"



Let me start my answer for this question by repeating something a reviewer said of my essays in *Turning the Wheel: Essays on Buddhism and Writing*. He said I was superior essayist, but not a great one. I think that judgment is fair. The essay as a literary form comes easily to me. About 50% of my body of published work is non-fiction (or the essay) and the rest is fiction. Remember: when I was a freshmen in college, I'd write the essay assignments (or term papers) for people in my dormitory (who wanted to party over the weekend) for \$5. an essay, money-back guaranteed if they didn't get an "A." I *never* had to refund anyone's money. (Today I always tell students that this unethical exercise during my wayward youth led to my becoming a writer while the people who paid me to write essays for them never learned how to write.) These brief essays for E-Channel also come easily for me, because once I start thinking about a subject it's natural for me to write down my ideas. And one idea always leads to another, like a tree branching out. For me, the experience is very much like *dhāraṇa* or the one-pointed concentration that is the first stage of formal meditation.



But I'm not a great essayist, nor have I worked at being one. A truly *great* American essayist is someone like James Baldwin, who gave us perhaps a dozen essays that will forever define a certain dimension of the American experience. (Like many critics, I feel his essays are superior to his fiction, though his first novel *Go Tell It on the Mountain* is worth discussing for historical reasons.) Baldwin's essays, in addition to being beautiful performances of language, pack a rare emotional power. I work to get emotion into my fiction, but in my essays and articles I'm not emotional. Just professorial in my effort to clarify a subject, first for myself, then hopefully for a reader. At best, my work in the essay form might just be called meditational.

This work came about probably as an extension of my background in journalism when (briefly) I was a newspaper reporter, columnist, and features writer in Illinois in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Philosophy is also a contributing factor to the essays I've written insofar as in the early 1980s I made a strong effort to teach myself how to write philosophically for popular magazines, in other words, finding ways to express often esoteric concepts without using the tribal languages employed in philosophy seminars and academic publications for specialists. I believe the first work where I managed to successfully do that was "Philosophy and Black Fiction," published in *Obsidian* in 1980. And, of course, in the essays I've written for popular Buddhist magazines what I attempt to do is present with accuracy and clarity philosophical concepts and experiences in a way that is reader-friendly. What Edgar Allen Poe said of the short story probably applies to the essay: namely, it most likely works most effectively as an experience if it can be read in a single sitting. And for me, what I value in the essays I read (and hope occurs in the ones I write) is the fact that the writer has offered me the opportunity to carefully and methodically think or reason along with him or her about a particular subject.

It is accurate to say that most of my articles and essays have been works requested by a publication's editor, for example, "A Sangha by Another Name" was a piece *Tricycle's* founder and publisher Helen Tworikov asked me to do. But other essays were originally written as public addresses (like some of the works by Ralph Waldo Emerson and Frederick Douglass) or keynote speeches. "The End of the Black American Narrative" was written that way and delivered for the Martin Luther King Jr. holiday at Washington and Lee University.

What pleases me about writing in the essay form is that some of these assignments, like the recent introduction I wrote for *The Photographs of Gordon Parks*, or earlier introductions, prefaces or forewords such as "A Capsule History of Blacks in Comics" in Roland Laird's *Still I Rise: A Cartoon History of African Americans*, and the introduction for John Gardner's *On Writers and Writing*, can become stand-alone pieces that are collected and reprinted in books like *Turning the Wheel: Essays on Buddhism and Writing* (2003); *I Call Myself an Artist:*

Writings by and about Charles Johnson (1999); and the brand-spanking new book just published by Authorspress in India, *Charles Johnson: Embracing the World* (2011).

One of the most famous quotes we have from Karl Marx is "The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point, however, is to change it."

When I first read that as a young philosophy student I enjoyed its activist thrust, but somewhere in the back of my mind I kept thinking, "Just how *well* have we interpreted this world?" That, in essence, is what I try to do daily as an artist---the effort to interpret and better understand the world around me, to bring it some clarity. Sometimes the interpretation is best rendered as a short story. Sometimes as a novel or drawing. Or in essay or screenplay form. I've never privileged or prioritized one form of expression over another. And, as a footnote to Marx, I think we can say that artistic (and philosophical) interpretations have down through history changed lives through the liberation of perception.

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at [4:03 AM](#)

<http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/09/tell-me-good-essay.html>

Monday, September 19, 2011

THE LITERARY DUET: CREATIVE WRITING AND CRITICAL THEORY

"Try to be one of the people on whom nothing is lost!" Henry James, *The Art of Fiction*.
E. Ethelbert Miller asks: "Is it important for a creative writing teacher to encourage his/her students to study critical theory?"

It is difficult for me to imagine a student in one of the nearly 300 creative writing programs in America (and we only seem to have these in America) not having the requirement of taking a certain number of literature courses. In those courses it is today nearly impossible to escape the interpretative or hermeneutic approaches we gather under the general term "critical theory."

As a philosophy graduate student in the early 1970s, I was immersed in works by Marxist-oriented authors considered to be the principle theorists of critical theory---the "Frankfurt School" philosophers (Marcuse, Adorno, Horkheimer, Habermas) Foucault, and Barthes. With my early emphasis on phenomenology and aesthetics, it was also inevitable that my literary studies were influenced by not only the New Criticism of the 1940s and '50s, but also structuralism, feminist theory, and to a lesser extent by deconstruction. Every well-educated student of literature should be acquainted with these approaches.

Lately, or perhaps I should say since the 1980s, I find my interest moving toward certain aspects of Critical Race Theory (CRT), specifically toward the area called "Whiteness Studies," *i.e.*, toward examinations that show us how "race" is historically constructed with the intention of perpetuating white supremacy and dominance. Very exciting work in this area is coming our way from philosopher George Yancy. In the brilliant introduction to his forthcoming book, *Look, a White! Philosophical Essays on Whiteness*, Dr. Yancy "flips the script" by inviting white readers to see themselves through the eyes of people of color, to see how "whiteness is the transcendent norm in terms of which they live their lives as persons" and how this recognition is so very "threatening to a white self and a white social system predicated upon a vicious lie that white is right--morally, epistemologically, and otherwise." *Look, a White!* is a book I recommend for all readers.

But Whiteness Studies is no longer limited to the world of the Academy. A recent article by Jen Graves in Seattle's *The Stranger*, entitled "Deeply Embarrassed White People Talk Awkwardly About Race," reveals how progressive whites are embracing the Critical Race Theory critique of whiteness and attempting to address it through organizations such as the Coalition of Anti-Racist Whites (CARW), which meets every month at the downtown Y in Seattle. There, members confront what CARW cofounder Scott Winn sees as the truth that, "Whiteness is the center that goes unnamed and unstudied, which is one way that keeps us as white folks centered, normal, that which everything else is compared to---like the way we name race only when we're talking about a person of color...We can name how some acts hurt people of color, but it's harder to talk about how they privilege white folks...I think many white people are integrationists in that 'beloved community' way, but integration usually means assimilation...As in, you've gotta act like us for this to work."

Graves says that, "I grew up in a middle-class white suburban neighborhood. Although we never had a black family over for dinner, every house on our street hosted black men doing perp walks through our living rooms on the news. I didn't realize the contradiction until much later—that our seemingly all-white existence was predicated on keeping other people *other*." And in this lengthy article she shares Mab Segrest's observation that in terms of the lived-experienced of whiteness, "Women are less white than men, gay people are less white than straight people, poor people less white than rich people, Jews than Christians, and so forth." Jen Graves's challenging article can be read in its entirety at <http://www.thestranger.com/seattle/deeply-embarrassed-white-people-talk-awkwardly-about-race/Content?oid=9747101>

Needless to say, Critical Theory and Critical Race Theory will not help an apprentice writer learn anything about *techne* or craft. Furthermore, during the creative process, which is one of discovery, theories and explanatory models should be set off to one side, if a writer hopes to create on the basis of his or her own unique voice and vision. However, an acquaintance with Critical Theory and Critical Race Theory fulfills Henry James's advice to a young writer (see epigraph), and in ways that James himself was probably unaware of. Every writer, student---and citizen---should know something about CRT. For the illusion of "race"----the racial *I*, self or personal identity---and its everyday construction are difficult to thematize because they are presuppositions so ingrained in our cultural conditioning in the white West that they are almost invisible, and are as close to us in our daily, lived-experience as to go unnoticed like our breathing. The beauty of CRT investigations is that, at their best, they deconstruct such lies, illusions, and fantasies, forever changing---in a true phenomenological fashion (and one also compatible with Buddhist self-examinations)---the way we experience and create moment-by-moment our world.

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at [12:42 AM](#)
<http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/09/literary-duet-creative-writing-and.html>

Monday, September 19, 2011

BAA BAA BLACK SHEEP HAVE YOU A BLACK AESTHETIC?

"It is my belief that the artist's first allegiance is to the imagination, as opposed to any prevailing dogma...When artists submit to being told what to write---if that telling comes from anyone but themselves---they have abandoned the history that gave them birth and sustained their lives in the first place." Clayton Riley, *The Demands of Craft*, an address presented at the 1978 Howard University Black Writers Conference.

E. Ethelbert Miller asks: "How important is it for black writers to talk about a black aesthetic? Do you think there is one? Some young writers mention the post-soul aesthetic, what does this term mean to you?"

The single most disastrous and disappointing course I taught during my entire career in higher education was called "The Black Aesthetic." This course I took on during my second year of teaching as a doctoral student at SUNY Stony Brook. The previous year I had taught a course in the Philosophy Department called "Radical Thought," a survey that included everything from Marx's "1844 Manuscripts" to Critical Theory. But that year *Faith and the Good Thing* (1974) was published, and so the Department of Comparative Literature asked me to teach for them (I had taken several graduate classes there, some with the late Polish theater critic and Shakespeare scholar Jan Kott.)

Things went well enough during my first semester when I taught a course called "Third World Literature," which I inherited from visiting professor Kofi Awoonor, who in 1975 returned home to Ghana to head the English department at the University of Cape Coast and, sad to say, was imprisoned without trial for helping with the escape of a soldier accused of trying to overthrow the military government. (On Stony Brook's campus several of us faculty and students held a reading from Awoonor's works to protest his incarceration.) Then I was asked to teach something called "The Black Aesthetic."

I was simply the wrong young man for that job. It was too early in my teaching career. Furthermore, in 1976 I was not convinced there was anything we could universally call a "white aesthetic" or a "black aesthetic." (Or for that matter, an "Asian aesthetic." *Wabi-sabi* may be an aesthetic concept for those Japanese people oriented toward Zen, but certainly not for everyone in Japan; or China, or Thailand, where my 1997 Microsoft-sponsored research on the Thai sense of beauty revealed that beauty for many Thais has a significant relationship to the concept of *riabroi*, which has no Western equivalent.) My Stony Brook class emptied of students until I was left with only one who showed up---a young woman who was an acquaintance of Amiri Baraka and his wife---to argue with me. From my perspective as a Ph.D. student in philosophy in the mid-1970s, the writers who presented the case for a "black aesthetic" were sloppy thinkers, too subjective, more inclined to *emote* than provide analysis that was trustworthy, mired in essentialist thought, poor at defining their terms, offering evidence that was apodictic, and reasoning in a fashion that was systematic. Now it must be said---and since then I've said this often (see my 1986 essay "A Phenomenology of *On Moral Fiction*")---during the 2500-year history of Western philosophy, aesthetics tends to the scandal of the discipline, the bastard child

who, despite our best theories, remains in the realm of opinion and prejudice. The subject itself cannot be quantified (nor should it be) and so often defies objective treatment.



CLAYTON RILEY

So during winter, 1976 I learned my lesson and never again attempted to teach a course on a "black aesthetic." (And I have no idea what a "post-soul aesthetic" is supposed to be.) Other black writers in the mid-to-late 1970s were facing the same problem I had in 1976 with race-based aesthetics (and this problem, which dates back to the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s, led, of course, to my 1988 book, *Being and Race: Black Writing Since 1970*, which was my Stony Brook dissertation). In his 1978 address at Howard University's Black Writers Conference, Clayton Riley stated that, "Craft is, in my view, the perception and application of excellence." Then he says:

"The *way* things are written, or otherwise constructed as examples of the impulse to share information, has often been subordinated to that which many people have come to feel is the more significant---in fact the *only* significant---testimony of *what* has been formulated as a writer's evidence of conscious commitment to tribal ethics. We have, as Black writers and artists, contested this point at conferences such as this one, and at numberless other gatherings."

Riley bemoaned the situation of those artists who "commit the latter-day, 20th century sin of living as an 'incorrect' person who has, by such inclinations, betrayed those brothers and sisters whose fundamentalism derives from the certainty that political stimulation and activity remain the bedrock of any truly human sensibility."

He quotes from Albert Murray's beautiful essay "The Social Function of the Storyteller," where that distinguished writer notes that, "It is the writer as artist, not the social or political engineer or even the philosopher, who first comes to realize when the time is out of joint." Then Riley concludes with these words on craft and vision:

"Artists seek to find out, to explore, taking on in the process the risky business of knowing what is not easy to know---the danger of discovery. In this, writers most especially, have an entire world---not just the fractured universe of American racism and psychic social disorder---to employ in structuring systems and methodologies to make up new planets, new societies, new ways of being eminently more human. Craft is the vehicle to convey us through another sky, one in which we can come to realize that form is a vital dimension of content, not an isolated point on someone's broken political compass."

All I can say is that I wish I'd been able to invite Mr. Riley to my Black Aesthetic course two years before he wrote "The Demands of Craft." He would have given my students a great deal of wisdom and perhaps saved me a good deal of grief.

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at [4:09 AM](#)

<http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/09/baa-baa-black-sheep-have-you-black.html>

Wednesday, September 21, 2011

THE VOICE OF ONE MAN

Style is never simply technical choice, but evolves from how a writer sees the world...(To embrace) a readily identifiable prose style without being aware of its tyranny and inevitability of voice...(is to embrace) a ready-made point of view. Linsey Abrams, "A Maximalist Novelist Looks at Some Minimalist Fiction."

E. Ethelbert Miller asks, "Writers talk about finding their voice? When did you find yours?"

In the late 1960s when I was a Journalism major, I had a professor who was fond of giving his students a copy of a decades-old newspaper article, with the author's name removed, and asking them to identify who wrote it. Just as art history students are tested on recognizing an anonymous painting, and music students on naming a composer based on an unidentified scrap of his music, so too, this professor expected us to determine the newspaper man who did this piece by its style and voice alone. A couple of class members rose to the occasion. (I was one of them but only because I had a friend who took this class before me and told me the answer.) The piece in question was an old news article by Ernest Hemingway. If you knew his fiction, you were certain to recognize the personality and linguistic decisions in this newspaper story.

For many readers and writers "voice" is a dimension of writing that proves to be elusive, intangible, and difficult to define. Often some people will just say, as they do of pornography, "I know it when I see it." But when we *don't* see it, which is usually the case with student fiction and much of published writing, we must judge that work of fiction to be *unvoiced* or *voiceless*, and therefore lacking in one of literature's more subtle and important dimensions. But, yes, this subject is difficult to discuss, for in order to do so we must talk about an artist's individual vision, his unique approach to language, and viewpoint in fiction.

Jean-Paul Sartre was spot-on in *Saint Genet* when he observed that "The word is the Other." In his analysis, he pointed out that, "Language is a *nature* when I discover it within myself and outside of myself with its resistances and laws which escape me: words have affinities and customs which I must *observe*, must *learn*..." Language precedes us. We find it "out there" in the social world, and we must learn its rules, its logic and the way that, as Sartre says, "words sometimes display surprising independence, marrying in defiance of all laws and thus producing puns and oracles within language; thus the word is *miraculous*."

In developing a voice what the writer does is transform or personalize the expressive instrument--language---adapting and individuating it to fit his experience, his vision of the world. Voice and vision, these are two sides of the same phenomenon. And I would venture to say voice is absent in apprentice writing precisely because the writer has yet to develop for himself (or herself) a vision of how the world works.

There are writers possessing a very strong temperament, and for them the specificity of their individual voices is one of the delights of their fiction, just as much as their stories (for their voices *are* the vehicles by which their stories are delivered with panache). For that reason they

never change voices from one book to another. Just as with their speaking voice, their literary voice has its individual tics, quirks, and eccentricities. An example? At the moment I'm thinking of P.G. Wodehouse, Kurt Vonnegut, and perhaps I'll throw in D.H. Lawrence, too, but you can easily add other authors to this list of the kind of writer I'm talking about. It's possible, even likely probable, that my non-fiction falls into this category, especially when I'm writing about Buddhism. But, as a storyteller, I tend to deliberately practice what some have called "narrative ventriloquism," or changing my voice to fit the story being told. Think of this as being like the way a puppet-master switches voices for a Punch and Judy performance. Or, if you like, just think of it as putting on a mask for the duration of a fiction.

Changing voices is *de rigueur* for writing first-person stories, if the teller of the tale is not the author himself or herself. (Every actor not just playing himself on stage is adept at this form of shape-shifting; and I could open up this discussion to say a few words about how the very ability to put on a mask is itself an indication that we do not have a static, unchanging, enduring "self" but instead the ontological condition of emptiness or *shūnyatā* as Buddhists say--would acting even be possible if the self was a *substance* or essentialist or an unchanging Parmenidian entity?--- but we should leave that lecture for another time.) Consider the opening--tone, diction, personality---of the nameless Professor who opens my story "Alēthia":

"God willing, I'm going to tell you a love story. A skeptical old man, whose great forehead and gray forked beard most favor (when I flatter myself) those of that towering sociologist W.E.B. Du Bois, I am hardly a man to conjure a fabulation so odd in its transfiguration of things, so strange, so terrifying (thus it now seems to me) that it belongs on the pale lips of the poetic genius who wrote *Essentials* and that hallucinatory prose-poem called *Cane*."

Now compare that opening to the one for my story "Exchange Value," where the narrator is a teenager named Cooter living on Chicago's South Side:

"Me and my brother, Loftis, came in by the old lady's window. There was some kinda boobytrap---boxes of broken glass---that shoulda warned us Miss Bailey wasn't the easy mark we made her to be."

Obviously, neither one of these voices---one from the Academy, the other from the street---can be called *my* normal voice. Yet ironically (and in a way that Sartre called "miraculous"), they briefly became my voice and temperament during the time of each fiction's composition. (Potentially, we all have *many* voices within us. Think for just a moment about the black scholar, a Ph.D., who can lecture on nanotechnology one moment, then cuss you out the next moment if you make the mistake of stepping on his shoes.) This is how first-person in fiction operates. I should also point out something else. In my post dated September 6, 2011, entitled "One Minute Past Midnight," I mentioned that a minor character in my most recently written, third-person story speaks in Cockney slang. Were *he* to become the narrator for that story, then I, as a writer, would have to compose *every* sentence so that each becomes a window onto his unique world of experience.

All of the above should be obvious for when one writes in first-person. But that same sense of voice and personality should resonate, I believe, in third-person narratives as well. In the tale-telling tradition, this is fairly easy to do, as in the opening for my story, "The Sorcerer's Apprentice," for it employs a traditional and familiar stock voice:

"There was time, long ago, when many sorcerers lived in South Carolina, men not long from slavery who remembered the white magic of the Ekpe Cults and Cameroons, and by far the greatest of these wizards was a blacksmith named Rubin Bailey."

But a third-person voice that isn't stock can also cling to every sentence---and word choice--as in my story, "The Education of Mingo." The following example describes farmer Moses Green's efforts to "educate" a slave named Mingo.

"Now Moses Green was not a man for doing things halfway. Education, as he dimly understood it, was as serious as a heart attack. You had to have a model, a good Christian gentleman like Moses himself, to wash a Moor white in a single generation. As he taught Mingo farming and table etiquette, ciphering with knotted string, and how to cook ashcakes, Moses constantly revised himself. He tried not to cuss, although any mention of Martin Van Buren or Free-Soilers made his stomach chew itself; or sop cornbread in his coffee; or pick his nose at public market."

Here we have third-person narration *limited* to Moses Green. It is as if we as readers are perched on his shoulder, seeing everything from his point of view. And so the narration at times (or most times) is flavored with his speech patterns and diction, just as it would be in his dialogue. We've hardly exhausted the discussion of voice in this post. But I hope some of these reflections and examples are helpful.

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at [6:17 AM](#)

<http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/09/voice-of-one-man.html>

Thursday, September 22, 2011

THE CULTURE WARS

"Every assertion contains *some* truth, for unless the person making the assertion is 'anti-human,' he has detected something that is the case---however one-sided, fragmentary and partial his perception of it may be. Hence, according to Hegel, what is called for is not a legal verdict that decides *between* conflicting assertions; what is called for is a formula, or concept, that reconciles the assertions by expressing what is true in both without also asserting what is false and one-sided in each." W.T. Jones on Hegel in *A History of Western Philosophy: Kant to Wittgenstein and Sartre*.

E. Ethelbert Miller asks: "Why do you think America has been having cultural wars? What's at stake here? Is this about controlling or owning the American narrative?"

Today's question is so large and complex that a proper answer would require a multi-volume critique of America dating back to at least the Civil Rights Movement but most likely to the founding of the republic. Therefore, because some of my answers this month have ran a bit long, I think it best to keep this post brief, limiting it to basically one central idea I'm comfortable with and certain about---an essentially Kantian and Hegelian idea that is, believe it or not, compatible with both the spirit of Buddhism and Taoism.

Here is that idea:

The opposite of a truth is not always a falsehood. Rather, the opposite of a truth may often be another compelling and equally justified but different truth. In both law and philosophy we refer to these as antinomies, the latter being "a contradiction between two statements, both apparently obtained by correct reasoning." What is at stake here? I would answer: the conflict of interpretations (or narratives about what America is and should be), which is as old as the human species itself. And I'm afraid we cannot turn to nature for the adjudication of ethical questions without committing the Naturalistic Fallacy, pointed out by G.E. Moore, of deriving ethical conclusions from non-ethical premises or of defining ethical notions in non-ethical terms.

A *Seattle Times* reporter once told me, "If I don't have a conflict, I don't have a story." Our media thrives on just that (hysteria-drenched headlines), and daily caricatures both sides of the so-called Culture War with all too easy and convenient labels and language for sharply distinguishing between progressives and conservatives, Democrats and Republicans, the left and right, etc. Media interpretations tend to be disjunctive, cast in an either/or formulation. But there can be no question, at least to me, that there are on both sides of our present cultural, political, and ideological Divide ideas, narratives, and interpretations that are silly and empirically unverifiable *and* also ideas that are antinomies: opposing visions that each contain propositions that appear indubitable. America has been a place of opportunity *and* a country that until recently systematically oppressed its non-white racial minorities; it does have a history of "exceptionalism" *and* a dark history of imperialism. Indeed, American history can be defined by its disagreements. (At a dinner in April, 2008 at the University of Michigan, I made the comment that it seemed to me that Americans simply don't like each other these days, whereupon writer Nicholas Delbanco, whose life has been spent in both England and America, immediately

replied, "Americans have *never* liked each other." Sadly, I have to agree with his more bluntly honest revision of my observation.)

In the social and political world perhaps the only way to escape antinomies is by the creation of societies like Ayatollah Ali Khamenei's Iran or Mao's China, where the conflict of interpretations is adjudicated by force, *i.e.*, the side that wins the argument in the marketplace of ideas is the one in control of the police. Supporters of the opposing view are simply suppressed or extinguished. But if we believe in democracy, and if we accept the thesis that as long as human beings exist on this planet they will have a tendency to interpret in different ways the mysterious and ambiguous universe in which we find ourselves, then it is inevitable that an on-going Culture War involving values and moral visions will be our very human---perhaps all *too* human---way of life. Certainly every year of my life has been lived in a country, indeed a world, torn by the endless, at times fatiguing but also profoundly human conflict of interpretations over what *is* and *ought* to be. And I suppose I have to say I prefer that messy, nerve-wracking condition of perpetual disagreement to the kind of "unity" in ways of seeing that every form of fascism seems to favor.

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at [7:25 AM](#)

<http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/09/culture-wars.html>

Friday, September 23, 2011

WHEN WE WERE YOUNG AND WANTED TO BE JOURNALISTS AND NOT MFA STUDENTS

E. Ethelbert Miller asks: "At one time we didn't have creative writing programs to support. Are these programs responsible for developing better writers?"



I taught in a creative writing program for over 33 years. Obviously, I feel such programs have value. And the CW program at the University of Washington is especially distinguished (ranked once among the 10 best out of nearly 300 such programs in America), having on its faculty of about 10 writers four who are MacArthur fellows. (Richard Kenney, Linda Bierds, Heather McHugh, and myself before I retired.) Those writers, and their predecessors, are master teachers and have assisted countless students since creative writing classes were started at UW shortly after World War II (I think the year was 1947) by poet Theodore Roethke, a two-time recipient of the Pulitzer prize.

But I was never a product of writing programs. In terms of education, I was a product of Journalism and Philosophy. Historically, as I mentioned, creative writing programs in America did not exist until after World War II. And you only find such programs in America. Europeans I've spoken with find such classes to be baffling, like an oxymoron, insofar as the general notion across the EU is that literary creativity---such things as imagination, vision, etc.---cannot be taught. And I agree with that judgment. We can't teach imagination and vision. What creative writing programs *do* teach when they are at their best is technique and aspects of craft. Also they place apprentice writers in direct contact with established ones, who can serve as their mentors. In those programs, many often have the chance to serve as editors on a literary journal, and to teach beginning poetry and fiction workshops. For their thesis, they must, ideally, produce a publishable work---a novel, collection of short stories or volume of poetry. Again, in terms of the ideal, these theses would be sufficiently professional to secure the young writer an agent and/or his or her first book contract. Unfortunately, in too many cases that I've seen what many MFA students mostly want after graduation is to get a tenured job teaching creative writing

themselves, like their professors, rather than devoting their energies to writing and publishing prolifically.



So we have an important question before us: What would aspiring writers do if there were no creative writing programs? I think they would learn the rudiments of their craft, the essentials, in the same place that writers in the 20th century did before 1945. Namely, on newspapers. (Or perhaps now at our 21st century equivalent to dead-tree journalism.) What writerly virtues does newspaper journalism teach that are of value to a fiction writer? In my professional experience, there are four:

(1) First, a writer for newspapers is conditioned from his or her first week on the job to write a lot and on many subjects. Typically, a journalist files 3 or 4 (and perhaps more) stories a week. You learn to write fast, and to not even *think* about that fact because it is a job requirement. In other words, you learn to make your first drafts clear and well-structured. (Inverted Pyramid-style paragraphs for straight news stories, but more literary approaches are possible for features and longer form journalism.) You learn that you can't afford to flinch before a writing assignment---a feature, a news story, a weekly column, a book or movie review, an editorial, a lengthier op-ed opinion piece, an in-depth investigative series---and you certainly can't afford the luxury of that strange psychic condition called a "writer's block." (Try telling that to your editor, "Gee, boss, I've had a writer's block for the last two weeks." Anyone who says that will be soon sending out his resume and seeking employment elsewhere.)

(2) You learn to write for the broadest audience possible. An old rule of thumb was that news stories in *The New York Times* should be understandable by someone with a 12th grade education (for lesser papers the target was an eighth-grade education, but that rule was made back in the 1960s when our public school system was in much better shape than it is now, and when we did not have at least 1 out of 5 Americans---and almost 50% in Detroit---being functionally illiterate). Once, we called newspapers the Fourth Estate, an essential feature of any democracy because citizens who have the franchise, the right to vote, need reliable information to guide them in the decisions they make on election day. So being able to write for everyone---to communicate with everyone who can read---is something a journalist learns from day one on the job.

(3) On newspapers, a writer learns to do research. He or she learns to ask the six most important storytelling questions: Who, What, When, Where, How and Why? You have the library of news stories previously published by your paper---the morgue---to draw upon. But,

more importantly, you learn how to interview people, to shut up and listen, and how to ask good questions. Remember: the quality of the answers we get in this life is based on the quality of the questions we ask.

(4) And, lastly, you learn not to see your prose (or copy) as sacred. Or carved in stone. What you write is just copy. It can always be improved by revision. When you're done writing, it goes directly across the room to your editor, who will delete, add, and change what you wrote, sometimes in ways that might make you want to scream and pull out your hair, because your by-line will *still* appear on that piece. In other words, being a staff writer for a newspaper teaches a writer humility. There is no place for prima donnas in the newsroom. Only for professionals who know how to get the job done *and* by or before its deadline.

These are not always the virtues emphasized (by the threat of being fired) that MFA students encounter in their more gentle, nurturing two-year programs. But the experience of writing for newspapers obviously served well generations of fiction writers from the late 19th century through the first half of the 20th. I recommend this experience for apprentice literary writers today. Such an experience of writing every week from the trenches, so to speak, will only serve to make them better professionals when they turn to producing literature and working as writers who can take on *any* assignment that comes their way.

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at [12:35 PM](#)
<http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/09/how-creative-can-one-be-in-creative.html>

Saturday, September 24, 2011

THE RISKS WE TAKE, THE RISKS WE LIVE WITH, THE RISKS WE WRITE ABOUT.

E. Ethelbert Miller asks: "In a 2006 interview with Shayla Hawkins you mention how writers should take emotional risks. Does this require a teacher or mentor? Does emotional risks differ from the risks a writer makes in regards to form or structure?"

In my writing workshops, whenever it was necessary to discuss the issue of characterization, I would explain to my students what they needed to know about their main or central characters in a story. Some of my advice was standard fare. For example, that one's protagonist (*and* the story's reader) should not come out of the story as clean as when he or she went in. The conflict and its development will force the protagonist to undergo change, to evolve. I told my students they must know as much about their character as Lajos Egri indicates in the biographical questions he says writers must ask in "The Bone Structure" section that appears in his classic work *The Art of Dramatic Writing* (1942). As an exercise, I'd ask them to write their main character's obituary. And then I'd ask them to do something that always caused a few students in the room to visibly squirm.



I asked them to determine what their protagonist most feared in this world. I told them I didn't mean snakes or spiders. No, I meant his or her deepest *social* fear. The one situation they most dreaded experiencing. The one event they would prefer to die than have to face. Then I told them they should maneuver their protagonist into exactly that situation to see what happens---if, in fact, he or she is destroyed by it, or is changed by it and in what ways. Everyone in class knew what doing that would require. They knew what I was asking of them. They would have to delve deeply into the most tender, raw, and painful places in themselves and identify their *own* deepest social fears.

In some of my novels and stories there are moments---passages---when I've had to do that. When the story demanded that. *I.e.*, to give to one of my characters an excruciatingly painful experience from my past or the life of someone close to me. There is such a passage in my story "The Sorcerer's Apprentice," and when I wrote it tears were falling from my eyes onto the typewriter keys. (Earlier in my life, there was nothing more dreadful to me, a good Confucian son, than the thought of failing my father and mother, letting them down after all the sacrifices they had made for me, and in this story that is exactly what the protagonist must suffer through.)

There is another in *Dreamer*---a passage where one of the main characters (Matthew Bishop) remembers when he and his mother traveled South during the era of segregation, were hungry, and the humiliation she received (that any black person would have received) at a white, roadside diner, but even that, Matthew sees, cannot diminish his mother's dignity and innate nobility. To a somewhat lesser degree, writing about the details of my mother's death in a recent E-Channel post entitled "Death Is A Bridge We All Must Cross" (July 17), and the feeling I had of being orphaned, was a small step in the exercise of deliberately bearing one's soul on the page.

These are emotionally important moments in fiction. I believe they transcend what normally passes for analysis in literary criticism (for example, structuralism, semiotics, deconstruction) because they are so raw, and in no way cerebral, or intellectualized. Their power is primal. Pure unadulterated feeling beyond concepts. Beyond theory. No teacher or mentor can help a student achieve this. These are intentional risks of the heart, not craft. They are a giving on the page of what is not easy to give. It seems to me that most of these moments take place in our childhoods, when we were most vulnerable. Describing those episodes, a writer must open himself or herself, become emotional naked, brutally honest, and trace with infinite care every laceration, wound, and scar to the best of his (or her) ability in order to get it right, to finally externalize it on the page and liberate himself from it. And all of that is, of course, in the service of the story. In the greater service of literature.

This kind of writing takes a certain kind of courage. (And also, I think, takes a toll on the writer, takes a chunk out of him or her, emotionally.) And I am not as good at this as many writers I admire. Foremost among these is James Alan McPherson. For I will never forget one of his essays in which he describes the denial of his father's genius during the era of segregation (he came up with an invention whites would not allow him to give to the world), the devastating toll that took on him, and a scene toward that essay's end when father and son are literally united by electricity---his father is repairing a light fixture, sticks one hand into the socket, has his son's hand in the other, and the son is holding an object to ground them both. If either one of them lets go, the other (or both of them) will die. And in that transcendent scene, as electricity and the elemental power of the universe courses through them, the black father looks down at his son, and quietly says, "I would never hurt you."



JAMES ALAN McPHERSON

McPherson has achieved this kind of leave-you-shattered-in-your-seat magic time and again in his short stories and essays. Little wonder then that on October 12, 2012, he---a recipient of the Pulitzer prize for one of his short story collections, and one of the first MacArthur fellows---will be honored with a tribute at the Englert Theatre in Iowa City when he receives the first Paul Engle Award, which "honors an individual who, like Paul Engle (a long-time director of the Iowa Writers' Workshop), represents a pioneering spirit in the world of literature through writing, editing, publishing, or teaching, and whose active participation in the larger issues of the day has contributed to the betterment of the world through the literary arts."

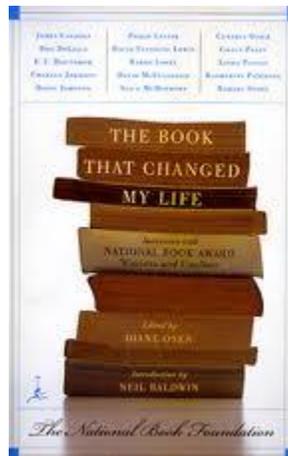
Emotional honesty such as we find in McPherson's well-crafted work is an achievement more than deserving of such honors and awards.

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at [2:53 PM](#)

<http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/09/risks-we-take-risks-we-live-with-risks.html>

Sunday, September 25, 2011

D.H. LAWRENCE



E. Ethelbert Miller says: "In the interview included in **THE BOOK THAT CHANGED MY LIFE** (edited by Diane Osen) you use the term creative philosophy. Could you define this? Also in this interview one of the books you list that shaped your writing life is **THE COLLECTED SHORT STORIES** of D.H. Lawrence. What do you like about Lawrence's work?"

I'd like to divide my answer for this question into two posts. In this one, I'll talk about D.H. Lawrence.



I didn't become interested in Lawrence until I took a course at SUNY Stony Brook with English professor Homer Goldberg, who didn't have us study one of his major works, but instead *The Plumed Serpent*. Of that work Katherine Anne Porter wrote, "For sheer magnificence of writing, Lawrence has surpassed himself. His style has ripened, softened, there is a melancholy hint of the over-richness of autumn. Who looks for mere phrases from him? He writes by the passage, by the chapter, a prose flexible as a whiplash, uneven and harmonious as breakers rolling upon a beach, and the sound is music. His language rises from the page not in words but in a series of images before the eye; human beings move in vivid landscapes, wrapped in a physical remoteness, yet speaking with a ghostly intimacy, as if you were listening to the secret pulse of

their veins. All of Mexico is here, evoked clearly with the fervor of things remembered out of impressions that filled the mind to bursting. There is no laborious building up of local color, but an immense and prodigal feeling for the background, for every minute detail seen with the eyes of a poet. He makes you a radiant gift of the place."

Lawrence sensitized me the possibilities of poetic description in prose, especially for landscapes. (He was one of many writers who did that.) I encountered his work in the year between the acceptance of *Faith and the Good Thing* for publication in fall, 1973 and its release a year later in 1974. And after that encounter I was so dissatisfied with the descriptive work in my manuscript that I rewrote 20% of that novel---mainly descriptions---based on what I had learned from Lawrence.

When I discover an author who interests me, I binge on that writer's work. I read everything in print. I gorge myself on it. (My wife will tell you I have a tendency to do that with everything that interests me, that I'm excessive or obsessive that way until I exhaust my interest.) And I'm especially delighted if that author has a large body of work that is highly diversified across different fields of creative expression. (I've done this binge exercise with quite a few authors over the last 40 years, among them and to name just a few, Charles Dickens, John Gardner, Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, Hermann Hesse, Herman Melville, and certainly the philosophers I had to study.) So over the course of my first year in Stony Brook's doctoral program, I read all of Lawrence's novels. All of his short stories. (The short stories were one of my evening pleasures for months after a day of classes.) And in my writer's notebooks I took pages and pages of notes on his techniques, his narrative strategies, the workings of his mind when it came to creating metaphors and descriptive passages, what he chose to show and not show, and how he showed it.

Then I read works about him like *D.H. Lawrence and His World* by Harry T. Moore and Warren Roberts (The Viking Press, 1966). I read his poetry, his travel pieces, sketches, and his letters (there one sees the uniqueness of his literary style even in his quickly composed similes), his book reviews, introductions, and miscellaneous pieces in *Phoenix II: Uncollected Writings of D.H. Lawrence*, edited by Warren Roberts and Harry T. Moore (The Viking Press, 1970). I took a look at his drawings and paintings (e.g., "Boccaccio's Story" and "Red Willow Trees"), comparing the visual workings of his imagination to its operations when his medium was words. Such a total examination of a creator's *oeuvre* is helpful for a young writer because you see an artist at his best, technically, and *less* than best, by which I mean you see him fall just a hair (or a great distance) short of his finer performances, and that reveals the logic of his intention, what he was *trying* to do. You see him repeat himself, trying with varying degrees of success to nail down a particular feeling or image. You see him when he is handling his literary tools clumsily, and sooner or later you understand how to use such tools yourself.

I also read his essays. And it was with one of his racist essays, "On Being a Man," which appeared in the June, 1924 issue of *Vanity Fair* that my disappointment and disillusionment with Lawrence began. In his time he was controversial for his frankness in regard to sexuality; and he had champions who regarded him as a "towering genius." But after the Civil Rights Movement, and especially the rise of feminism and the Women's Movement, his literary stock has taken a real---and much deserved---beating.

I've always been saddened to discover racism, sexism, intolerance or the like in the work of literary writers I learned something from in terms of craft, or in the writers I admired for their storytelling prowess. But it is almost impossible *not* to stumble on something like that in white, Western authors working before 1970. Like us, they are creatures of their time, often guilty of the myopia and limitations of their moment in history. But my feeling is that we shouldn't throw the baby out with the bath water. I wouldn't want to take a cross-country bus trip sitting next to D.H. Lawrence. (He could be a rather nasty fellow.) And these days I have no interest in reading his work. Yet and still, I *do* appreciate what I was able to take away from the experience of his work when I was in my mid-twenties.

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at [6:58 PM](#)
<http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/09/dh-lawrence.html>

Tuesday, September 27, 2011

CREATIVE PHILOSOPHY: WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW.

Back to the things themselves. Edmund Husserl

"To philosophize is not to examine the things of which one is conscious, but rather to examine the very consciousness one has of things---the mode of being which things have when we are conscious of them. Thus, to say that philosophy must examine the consciousness of things is but another way of saying that it should examine the appearance of things, i.e., the being they have when they appear." Quentin Lauer, *Phenomenology: Its Genesis and Prospect*.

E. Ethelbert Miller asks: "In the interview included in **THE BOOK THAT CHANGED MY LIFE** (edited by Diane Osen) you use the term creative philosophy. Could you define this?"

The first person I heard describe philosophy as "creative" was Professor Garth Gillan, the advisor for my master's thesis in philosophy in 1973. He was referring to the many independent conference papers on Critical Theory that I wrote for him during the 1971-72 academic year. Later in life, my understanding of what he meant by philosophy being creative would deepen. It's important to understand that professional philosophers---those who teach in the field---are, like everyone else in this world, people who range from being geniuses to dull. Some are brilliant and deep, others mediocre and shallow. Some are best at teaching and don't publish (or at least not much). Some are good at explaining the ideas of other thinkers, but have few original ideas of their own. Some are elegant, entertaining prose stylists like Arthur Schopenhauer, and others are simply dreadful writers like Hegel. (If you want to have some fun, read Brand Blanchard's discussion of Hegel's writing flaws in Blanchard's 1953 lecture *On Philosophical Style*.) And, as Gillan pointed out to me, there are some who are not creative, and some who are, using the discipline of philosophy---its history and methodologies---to explore hitherto uncharted contemporary phenomenon.

If one's background is in phenomenology, one understands that philosophy is not something you just talk about and teach. It is something you *do*. In a blog/post it won't be possible for me to adequately explain, theoretically and historically, the entire Phenomenological Movement in its German, French, and American traditions (to say nothing of this approach being prefigured in Descartes, Kant and Hegel), especially if someone has no background in philosophy. But I can attempt here the hastiest of broad stroke sketches, one that I hope will lead readers to explore this subject in greater depth. (Just for the record, it took me five years to study all the important German, French, and American works in the canon of phenomenology and become skillful enough with the method to use it; one usually learns the method more quickly---a year in my case after a superb seminar with Dr. Don Ihde. Karl Jaspers once told Husserl that he was managing the method better than the theory, and Husserl said that this was as it should be and that in time the theoretical apparatus would become clear.)

Phenomenology was conceived, first and foremost, as a *method* for investigating experience or phenomenon. It does not necessarily seek new knowledge, as Dietrich von Hildebrand pointed out, but instead a new and more profound realization of the knowledge that one already has. Thus, it is not system-building, but a "radical empiricism" more akin to deconstruction (to

which it may be said to have given birth). One's investigation begins with the *epoché* or "bracketing" of the thesis of the "Natural Attitude" (*Einstellung*), which is the everyday, unreflective attitude of naive belief in the existence of the world. (Put another way, we take no position on the existence of the phenomenon.) This initial move is important because it "clears the field" of perception of judgments and presuppositions. This field is infinite. In principle, it contains the entire world. Husserl's analysis proceeds to other levels of reduction (including a psychological reduction, eidetic reduction, and phenomenological reduction), but we shall limit ourselves in this post to the *epoché*, which functions as a demythologizing device that prepares for an intuitional demonstration of the object being studied and is implied in the work of most phenomenologists such as Merleau-Ponty and Heidegger.

Once the field of perceptual experience is cleared, a phenomenologist then endeavors to *describe* what appears in that field and without, of course, recourse to deductive and/or explanatory models, or received meanings. (Sometimes the use of neologism is necessary when attempting to describe a new meaning or what Merleau-Ponty in his posthumously published work *The Visible and the Invisible* called "wild Being.") Always we are only concerned with what is *given* during the perceptual event. Every analysis begins with first-person immediacy, a first-person intuition (the experience of that which the mind signifies in thought) by a historically situated subject (*noesis*) of an object (*noema*), which may be things or thoughts; persons or events; categories or states of affairs; numbers or geometrical figures; or works of literature. And the way one intuits something (the way it appears) is an index to a man or woman's being-in-the-world. (*Dasein*) The link between subject and object or *noesis* and *noema* is *intentionality*, for every experience implies an object and every object something that experiences. We are indebted to Franz Brentano for this fundamental insight regarding intentionality. (Consciousness is always consciousness *of* something; or as we read in Herbert Spiegelberg's *The Phenomenological Movement* in his section on Brentano, "No hearing without something heard, no believing without something believed, no hoping without something hoped, no striving without something striven for, no joy without something we feel joyous about, etc.")

Husserl's own approach is often called a descriptive-formal ontology because what he sought were invariant structures (*eidōs*) in phenomenon. (In traditional metaphysics we have what is seen or appearances, and what is unseen or reality. Think of Plato's world of eternal, immutable forms and our world of appearances that "participate" in those forms. With phenomenology that distinction between phenomenon and noumenon is removed. There is only what appears *for* an embodied consciousness.) We come to see, as phenomenologists, that objects (*noema*) are always given to a subject (*noesis*) in a way that is perspectival, and in a series of temporally unfolding profiles.

If I hold up a cube before you, you will see its flat, front sides and its top. You do not doubt that it has a back side and bottom that are *co-present*, but at this moment the back side and bottom are perceptually *absent*. Merleau-Ponty calls this the "play of absence and presence." The back side and bottom of the cube (the profiles not given) are the empty intentions that constitutes the cube's *horizon*. I.e., what you will be able to see if you turn the cube over or around. But every phenomenon will exhibit something invariant (*eidōs*) despite its many profiles, even if the phenomenon is a fantasy object (Imagine right now "Pegasus." You may change many details---color, background or foreground, etc., but for it to *be* Pegasus, the object you are imagining must *be* a horse with wings). What is crucial to understand is that the object before us will exhibit

many profiles (appearances and meanings), some more adequate than others, and that this horizon is open-ended. It can never be brought into precise observation---it remains on the fringe of our perceptions. Furthermore, it is not possible in perception to have two profiles before us at the same time---for example, the cube seen from front and back, top and bottom simultaneously. (Some portraits by Picasso are a striking exception to this.) As one profile is called forth, the others recede from view. Thus, to *reveal* (a meaning) is also to *conceal* (other meanings). To describe an object (to *say*) is also to *show*. But that saying or showing renders other things unseen or "invisible."

Some phenomenal objects will offer our analysis tremendous resistance. They are difficult to examine because they so closely involve our being-in-the-world. In other words, our deepest and most unexamined forms of social conditioning. Our experience of race in the life-world (or *Lebenswelt*) is one such phenomenon, and is as close to us as our breathing, so familiar and heavily sedimented (with assumptions and presuppositions on our side, as subjects) that its unveiling may very well be experienced as threatening.

The *way* something appears is the beginning of our investigation. This first stage is eidetic (descriptive) science. But what we want to do is further explore the structural, invariant features of the phenomenon. Variation is one technique for this, and it can take many forms: (1) Imaginative variations performed on the object; (2) Perceptual variations; (3) And analytic variations (logical possibilities). (In art, think of the way the impressionists employed a basic phenomenological approach by concentrating on light, *i.e.*, Claude Monet painted objects in light dissolving at different times during the day. Think also of figure/ground reversals. Juxtapositions of context. Isolation of dominant and recessive traits. And transforming perspectives.) We also have the possibility of hermeneutic variations, *i.e.*, telling a story. Using narrative or intersubjective language to allow the object to appear in a different way. Apodicticity (or certainty) becomes weaker with the increase in variations, and adequacy increases as the object is noematically opened (or deconstructed).

These phenomenological investigations---especially the imaginative variations---can be considered "creative" in the purest meaning of that word. Certainly we see that creative efflorescence in the work of Jean-Paul Sartre who was in addition to being one of the 20th century's major philosophers also a novelist (he turned down the Noble Prize for literature) and a playwright (to name just a few of the hats he wore). And in the 1950s, Continental phenomenology came fully into flower with the works of Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Mikel Dufrenne's exhaustive *The Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience*.

Later in America in the 1970s, my dissertation advisor Don Ihde, one of our clearest, most precise teachers and practitioners of phenomenology, who popularized that tradition on these shores, enriched the interface of philosophy and the sciences with several works on embodiment relations and man/machine relations that build upon and extend the work of Paul Ricoeur and Martin Heidegger: *Hermeneutic Phenomenology: The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur* (1971); *Sense and Significance* (1973); *Listening and Voice: A Phenomenology of Sound* (1976); *Experimental Phenomenology: An Introduction* (1979), which was a best-selling work; *Existential Technics* (1983); *Technology and the Lifeworld* (1990); *Postphenomenology: Essays in the Postmodern Context* (1993), and other works since these were published.

And in this new century, right now, philosopher George Yancy is creatively using phenomenological methods to bring to his readers a fresh, deeper seeing into the experience of race, which is perhaps the one phenomenon in our lives that presents the greatest "coefficients of adversity," as Bachelard and Sartre would say. Among his many highly creative and ground-breaking books that use phenomenological principles and techniques to perform an archeology on race, *Black Bodies, White Gazes: The Continuing Significance of Race* (2008) and the forthcoming, *Look! A White! Philosophical Essays on Whiteness* are of particular importance.

So this is why I say philosophy at its best is creative.

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at [11:58 PM](#)

<http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/09/creative-philosophy-what-you-need-to.html>