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## POETRY AND PEDAGOGY

### A Memory of Michael Harper Teaching

By Robert Dale Parker

That first day, I was lost. He kept talking about “myths,” but it was clear these myths were *true*—and yet he didn’t seem to like most of them. They weren’t the myths I was used to, the Greek myths my high school teacher would spend the whole class period summarizing to us after we had read them, until the only thing that kept me awake was anger. Here I was a few years later wide awake again, this time listening to a teacher who talked about American myths and spoke my own anger, punctuated with a warm complicated smile that seemed to say, with irony, that it was above irony. He talked about Whitman’s language of everyday speech and William Carlos Williams’s rhythms of speech, myth, and history. I didn’t understand. The summer before, knowing I didn’t know enough about poetry, I had read Oscar Williams’s anthology of modern poetry, which had lots of Whitman, and Williams’s *Selected Poems*. I could hear—and see—the sounds of speech in Williams, but Whitman? With his eloquence—it seemed to me then—always at war with his affectations, the words alternately too pompous or chummy for actual speech, the contractions (ebb’d, bloom’d, learn’d) too histrionic? He told us to read Whitman’s “Preface” to the 1855 *Leaves of Grass*—emphasizing 1855.

I started reading Harper’s poetry—at that point it was *Dear John*, *Dear Coltrane* and *History Is Your Own Heartbeat*. It was tough going that first time through; *Dear John*, *Dear Coltrane* calls on so many different skills and knowledges. The rhythms shift from poem to poem, from the tense (I might now say “mythologizing”) beat of “Brother John” at the beginning, which sounds more like Bird than Trane; to softer, personal poems; to geographical poems; to friendship poems. I looked for help to the blurbs on the back cover, which quote Harper saying that his “major influences” are “musical.”

Wait, I thought, is that right? Granted, it was in the title, the homage to Coltrane; and granted, some of the best poems in the book, poems I found myself starting to read out loud, are pulsing, musical poems about music. Maybe even the devastating turn in the great poem “American History” marks, in its italicized “*redcoats*,” an ascendancy of musical inflection in speech, and an ascendancy of speech—of specifically verbal irony and disdain—in music. But if it were mainly music, where was Whitman? Where was Williams? Or Du Bois? Or Yeats?

I had to rethink Whitman’s extravagance and Williams’s plainness. And I had to think and rethink Harper’s eclecticism. The back cover, I decided, was wrong. The quotation must have been yanked out of context—or was Harper speaking truths in a way that pulled our legs a little, like the ironies he was teaching me to hear in Whit-

man's overstatement? Here was a fine black poet writing about all sorts of things, and blurb writers—and lots of reviewers—let the great wailing of jazz push the other things aside. The back cover mentioned oral tradition and Coltrane, Miles Davis, Billie Holiday, Bud Powell, "etc.," and nothing about *reading*. I was glad the musicians were there, but convinced that poetry was there too. I studied Whitman and Williams and started listening to Coltrane: *A Love Supreme*.

That helped. Meanwhile, there was Michael Harper in the classroom. He said "Poetry is about culture." He paused after he said it; he knew how to tell us when he was being oracular, though it didn't occur to me, then, to wonder how much of the oracularity lay in the form, something that I can now see Harper had figured out. Culture was form, form was culture. I was struggling to accommodate a love for language to the sense of cultural responsibility and possibility that literature held for me politically. "About culture"—that didn't sound like the poetry I thought I knew, the poetry about pretty scenes from nature or about personal crises. He said we had to know the forms, and passed out a list of forms, like a dare. He said we had to write sonnets, but he wouldn't assign them—another dare. Write sonnets, read Ernest Gaines, Kenneth Patchen, Columbus, Muriel Rukeyser, and learn what a sestina is. The absence of anything like a wink kept his pronouncements so straight that they came across almost as if he winked after all, roundaboutly. And "Poetry is about culture." Long pause. He looked us each in the eye. "And culture is about hegemony," and when we blinked, he somehow explained hegemony. Why, he asked one day, did Conrad write in English? That one I was ready for—because Flaubert had already written in French. As I said those words, I was afraid that to answer his question smacked too much of scoring a student's points and would spoil his thunder, but I hadn't anticipated the oracular pause and the cool surmising eye that followed my answer, right on the beat. That made me think more about Conrad, who could also have written in Polish. To find the language, Harper seemed to be suggesting, wasn't enough. You also had to make the language that you found.

All these things spoke of the rhythms in Harper's poems, the lingering over end-stops, the sense of knowing and holding the words that comes across in his repeated turn to the demonstrative "this": he tells us that it's right here, now, hurting us ("nightmare, say it loud") or pleasing us, that memory is now. The first line of "Blue Ruth: America" is the first line not only of that poem but also of *History Is Your Own Heartbeat*: "I am telling you this:" The savored colon is as typical of Harper as the demonstrative, and complements it by moving in an opposite direction: if the "this" moves into itself, the colon moves outward—so that, characteristically, Harper knots the inward with the outward: "contact," as his poems say.

Perhaps contact, always double-conscious, can never be complete, or else we wouldn't need the poems' testimony or recognize their nightmares. Thus in the title poem of *Song: I Want a Witness*, the act of witnessing is the effort to *testify*, as the poem puts it, and witnessing and testimony become both the gap and the joint between inward and outward, between the cultures and their forms, the forms and their cultures. The witnessing is history: "When there is no history/there is no metaphor," says the foreword. And if witnessing is history, for Harper, then we can also say that *when*

*there is no metaphor, there is no history*—no culture, no poetry, no song to plead for a witness.

Song takes us back to music. Harper's poems evoke traditions, including musical traditions, in a *language* of many musics, including jazz, blues (see especially the longer version of "Last Affair: Bessie's Blues Song" in *Images of Kin*), call and response (e.g., "Dear John, Dear Coltrane"), oratory (e.g., "Martin's Blues"), medical technocracy (e.g., "Debridement"). Perhaps the musical notes are among the most distinctive, but sometimes we let them drown out the specifically literary and poetic musics, whereas so much of the wonder in Coltrane or Harper comes in the medley of more sounds at once than any one metaphor can name. And so, while admiring the musical music, I want to testify also to the literary and poetic musics in Harper's work, as in the great title poem of *Nightmare Begins Responsibility*, which revises Yeats's epigraph to *Responsibilities*—"In Dreams Begin Responsibility," or, in the same volume, the last section of tributes culminating with "Alice," Harper's moving homage to Alice Walker and Zora Neale Hurston, which he was reading to audiences, as I recall, that in 1973 or '74 mostly included people who had never heard of Walker or Hurston. To have a tradition, he suggests, it needs to be testified to. Testimony becomes pedagogy, and pedagogy becomes prophecy.