

in the classes

POETRY

ENCOUNTER

BY james spencer

Poetry is an art in which confusion, evasions and superficiality of any kind are especially obvious. We know the potential of poetry to provide, per line or page, a more powerful turn-on than any other verbal art. When a poet falls short of this potential, his failure tends to be total. It is partly a question of courage. All good poems are written at some risk to the poet. When he succeeds, it is largely because he has found his way into the slippery reaches of his center and has come back to tell us about it. The poet has, in a sense, risked disorientation to get there and come back with a handful of the precious stuff. After all, he might have found that there is no center, or that unlike other people, he has none. Or that he has to build roads and bridges, repair damage, perhaps move mountains to get there. Sometimes he makes a frightening discovery -- like an acid trip in which you discover how much you have to un-learn before you can learn to be yourself. Sometimes, on one of those searches a poet comes to the place where it seems as if he must go back and start all over again, reconstruct himself on the basis of an entirely new set of assumptions. Despair hits him, a sense of wasted years, especially if POET is his self-image. No poet who has written for twenty years will lightly recommend it as a life work to the young. On the other hand, he is tempted to recommend it to everybody.

The emergence of affective education and the ideal of the actualized person have brought us powerful new vehicles for getting where the poet must go. This quarter I decided to make an experiment, bringing encounter techniques into my MFU poetry workshop. As far as I know, it is the first experiment of this kind in a creative writing class. Each quarter I had been more dissatisfied with the traditional approach -- analyzing and criticizing poems, trying to find ways of improving them. I decided that there were ways of bringing more life, energy, and incentive into the teaching of creative writing, and of accelerating the process by which poets learn to write better poems. The secret lay, I thought, in focusing more on the student and less on the subject matter. Getting into personalities, putting ourselves on the line. With the old approach,

discussion of the poem opened a few doors between the poet and others in the class, but sooner or later the poem became a barrier between them -- something to talk about as a way of avoiding talk about oneself. This happens in every creative writing class where someone has something he wishes to hide, and everyone always has. If the poem stood between members of the class, I reasoned, it also stood between the poet and himself. With the new approach we discuss each poem only as long as we learn more about the poet by doing so. When we find that the poem cannot tell us something about the poet that we want to know, we turn to the poet and use the up-front interchange of encounter techniques.

The method consists of the following. At each two-hour meeting, one member of the class reads ten or fifteen poems that he considers his best or his most personal. When he has finished reading, we ask such questions as: If we had never met him, never seen him, but we had these poems before us, what could we see or deduce about him? Do we like him? Why? Why not? What has given him great pain in his life? What gives him joy? What is his love life like? What does he despise or hate, and what does he value? Is he humorous or not? If not, why not? What are his blind spots? Does he skip lightly over desperate matters? What is he hiding? Who is he?

After, or during, preliminary answers to these questions we turn to the poet, trying to speak directly to him as we give our impressions of him. This encourages him to respond, from which we gain further impressions. He may grow defensive or angry or nervous. He may easily admit all the worse we have to say -- for instance, that he is very confused

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about his feelings (which are, after all, an exact model of his self-image), or that his poetry is superficial or evasive. If it appears easy for him to admit this, as it sometimes does, we ask him why it is so easy. Is he blocked? Is he suppressing feeling? We ask him about his life, and always, what he is feeling at the moment.

It is surprising how quickly a group of alert people can form a accurate idea of a personality in this way. In the encounter process the group expects honesty of all members, and usually gets it, because it is so easy to see that a person is being evasive or is holding back or deceiving himself. I do not fully understand why almost any group can achieve this tremendous accuracy of insight, which only exceptional individuals can achieve working alone, but that it exists is unquestionable. In an encounter meeting it is possible for the group to sense not only more than a single individual can usually sense alone, but more about the person than he can admit about himself. It probably has something to do with the fact that we are all sensitive to a slightly different spectrum of cues. What some miss, others see. The group quickly pools its insight, and a super-consciousness emerges. In the Poetry/Encounter class we not only listen to the poems and to the poets words while he is talking about himself, but we try to maintain a heightened sensitivity to his facial expressions, vocal intonations, breathstops, body postures, gesturing, and tension areas -- all the unconscious languages. When we describe the poet to himself as we see him, he sometimes finds that he has revealed more than he intended, or has revealed content that he did not know was there. This can be a little frightening. But it is understood among members of the group that the process is fundamentally an act of love. No gift is as valuable as the ability to see yourself as others see you, except the ability to see yourself as you are. And the former is the way we achieve the latter, both in action and imagination.

People who are curious about the poetry/encounter method often ask, "If you concentrate on the poet, how does this help him write better poems?" The answer should be obvious. To write a good poem, a poet must bring some material from his center, examine it in public (in the poem), in all its complexity and no matter how alarming, let his mind and his emotions play freely around it and through it, and finally make some sense of it that will be of use to himself and the reader. To do this well, the poet must of course have talent, and he must have trained that talent, but no amount of talent or training will produce a good poem unless the poet is capable of reaching to his center for the substance of it. A poet who can do this is a source of insight and stability for others. In a good poem the poet finds a solid place to stand within himself, surrounded by the always changing ground of thought, feeling, memory -- that is, within the complex and puzzling inner universe we all share. A good poem, above all, tells us where the poet is "at". He stands there, solid, even in uncertainty when that has been his discovery, with a coherent attitude toward some experience, and a coherent set of emotions, inviting us to stand there with him. The poetry/encounter technique, like all encounter technique, helps the poet discover where he's "at".

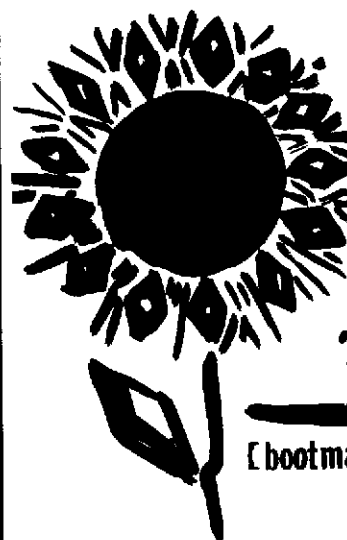
The idea of the Poetry Encounter class had its beginnings during an evening of rapping with Walter Van Tilburg Clark at my house on Perry Lane around the beginning of the Kesey era. A lot of things

were beginning to change then, and beginning to be. Those were pivotal years too. Clark and I agreed that teaching a creative writing class was like conducting psychotherapy on the sly, forcing writers to break down their inner compartments without admitting to the college that that's what we were up to. It was a subversive idea even among the humanists who understood from their training that something called self-knowledge was an attribute of the man with a liberal education. Clark and I proposed that in our ideal college every undergraduate student should have two years of psychotherapy or analysis and get a passing grade in self-knowledge and self-honesty before he could qualify for his four-year degree. At that time there was no affective education to speak of. Today in my ideal college or university I would replace the two years of psychotherapy with a four-year course in encounter, psychodrama, psychosynthesis, gestalt training, meditation, physiological feedback training -- the whole range of disciplines now being organized into a curriculum by the Transpersonal Institute.

It is too soon to know whether the poetry/encounter method will ultimately produce better poetry. In theory, it seems inevitable that it will. Meanwhile, members of the class are convinced that whatever the process may lead to, it is a turn-on of itself. Also, it has been discovered by the media, for whatever that's worth. KGO-FM announcer Tom Saunders recently taped a 50-minute interview with me, Dawn Carey, and Sue MacDonald. We rapped about the class, read some of our poems, and explained briefly how we would go about encountering each other, using the poems as a springboard.

I make moccasin BOOTS out of beautiful
oil-tanned COWHIDE · ELK · and DEERSKIN.

Also INDIAN PANTS with long fringe.
BEADED INDIAN DRESSES and old-time
MEXICAN STYLE VESTS



Tony Tiano

[bootmaker to Husain Chung]

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