Wednesday, June 1, 2011

TECHNOLOGY AND OUR CHANGING WORLD

A question far more interesting to me than "What do you consider to be the major inventions and discoveries during your lifetime?" is how technology has changed our lives and created an economy far different than the one my parents knew.

I recently read on my Kindle a story by Rand B. Lee entitled "Three Leaves of Aloe," which is included in *The Year's Best Science Fiction: Twenty-Seventh Annual Collection*, edited by Gardner Dozois. It opens with the protagonist Amrit Chaudhury, who works the telephones at Mumbai-Astra Telecom, Ltd. in India, joking with her undersupervisor Shradda Singh about the names they give for themselves to Americans they talk to. Maggie Jones. Bobbi Grant. "'Jane West!' Amrit put her left hand over her heart and fanned her right hand weakly. 'I mean to say, it isn't as though they can't tell by our voices that we're Not From Around These Parts.' She spoke this last in an exaggerated American accent, which set them both off (to giggling) afresh."

Who among us hasn't had that experience when talking to a computer technician half a world away? The term "global village" seems exactly right for our world at the dawn of the 21st century, a planet where the concept of the "nation state" seems obsolete when corporations are multi-national and do not respect artificially drawn geographic borders.

One of our mantras, which I've often repeated, is that today we find ourselves in a "highly competitive, global, knowledge-based economy." Okay, so far so good. But what does that *really* mean? I sniff a little bit of Darwinian "survival of the fittest" in that description. A new wrinkle on Social Darwinism. The jobs that sustained uneducated---or under-educated---men in my father's generation are no more. That economy, as we've been told repeatedly, has been replaced by a "service economy." Specialized knowledge and the social as well as language skills (especially foreign languages) women are quite good at trump the "size" and "strength" advantages that formerly helped men find jobs in construction, heavy industry, etc.

In a sense the playing field has been leveled in terms of race and gender, and that is good. That is progress. But today an American worker is in competition with labor all over the planet. And the preferred, even *required*, skills that make an individual competitive in this new technology-dominated era, the knowledge essential for America itself to survive in this century is (as President Obama never fails to remind us) summed up in STEM education (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math), which our schools K-12 are trying to implement with a sense of urgency---an urgency nowhere to be found when we talk today about the role of the humanities.

I enjoy hugely my Kindle, my Word Processor (Think of what Virgil, Homer, Shakespeare, or Dante would have accomplished with this, the internet, translation engines, and on-line writer's tools, which are a God-send for a contemporary writer; I recall back in the '60s or early '70s Amiri Baraka publishing an essay in *Black World* where he complained that the typewriter was "corny," and he's been proven right about that), and all manner of gadgets. However, late some nights when the world is quiet---a vision of a new, 21st century dystopia comes to me: societies here and around the globe where a new caste system arises based, not on race or gender, but instead on learning. On a very *specific* kind of learning and quantitative skills demanded by the new economic reality.

The Brahmin class, as I see it in this vision, will have as its avatars people like Bill Gates, Steve Jobs, and PayPal's Peter Thiel, the young men who invented Google and Facebook, the businesses like Virgin Galactic and Project Enterprise planning on launching tourists into suborbital space, *i.e.*, those who merge the new commerce with a specialist's knowledge of science and technology that is cutting edge. Those without such knowledge will slip or settle farther down in the economic and social caste system, condemned for a lifetime to low wages; and on the lowest rung will be those unfortunate human beings with no high tech education or skills at all. Perhaps some individuals in my vision of this brave new world that I imagine late at night---indeed, whole groups whose intellectual performance is below the new, required standards----will be considered "obsolete," and allowed to perish through what the Nixon administration once called "benign neglect."

Or am I imagining the world as it is today? You tell me.

Yet in the midst of such a gloomy meditation, I read in the newspaper a day or so ago that China and India, the home of Lee's character Amrit Chaudhury, are vigorously investing in Africa, swapping technology and the tools for modernization in exchange for access to that continent's natural resources, and educating Africans in their own equivalents to M.I.T. Perhaps the global village has a hopeful future after all.

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at 8:35 AM
http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/06/technology-and-our-changing-world.html

Wednesday, June 1, 2011

THE ONE

I imagine that my being an "only child" shaped my life in more ways than I can coax into consciousness. I've always marveled at people who grew up with brothers and sisters, like my wife (two brothers and three sisters), and my own son and daughter, who have a tight, loving bond from birth. My father came from a big, rural South Carolina family where he had six sisters and five brothers. (I have no dearth of cousins, aunts and uncles.) But my mother, who didn't like the South (she preferred our home in Evanston) was an only child. And *her* mother, my grandmother, was an only child, too. The matrilineal side of my family tree has, therefore, now vanished with their deaths.

If you do grow up as an only child, you learn early on to enjoy being alone, and to find ways to amuse yourself when your friends---or anyone---aren't around, which can be often. You read a lot, and as the cliche goes, see books as your "friends." And, as with books, it was drawing into which I retreated as a child.

There was something magical to me about bringing forth images that hitherto existed only in my head where no one could see them. I remember spending whole afternoons in the 1950s blissfully seated before a three-legged blackboard my parents got me for Christmas, drawing and erasing until my knees and the kitchen floor beneath me were covered with layers of chalk and the piece in my hand was reduced to a wafer-thin sliver.

Having only one child to worry about no doubt eased the financial stress on my hard-working father. My mother made sure he paid for me to have the suite of lessons she felt I needed---piano,

clarinet, even dancing lessons. (He paid, too, for my lessons when I was 15-years-old with cartoonist Lawrence Lariar and, when I was 19, bought me my first car, a used 1965 Corvair (gold) convertible---*that*, because I was saving up to buy a motorcycle, which was all I could afford, and my mother was afraid I'd kill myself on it so she pressured Dad into getting me the car.) However, none of those lessons stuck with me because all I really wanted to do was draw.

Of course, Dad also taught me how to *work.* I had part-time jobs during high school, but I remember coming home after my freshman year in college with no job lined up for the summer. On my first night back, my father announced to me that I'd better set my clock early---around 6 AM---because he'd already secured a summer job for me: as one of the student garbage men employed by the City of Evanston (where he was a night watchman) during the summer. I did that job for two summers straight, hauling Evanston's waste and trash on my back in a big, plastic tub. After work, I'd come home filthy, smelling from head to toe of sewage-tainted water from the garbage cans, but it was honest work that built muscle, which I needed because that same year (1967) I started training at a Chicago kung-fu school in the evenings.

An only child learns early the meaning of the title for Stephen Batchelor's book *Alone With Others: An Existential Approach to Buddhism.* Dare I say that an only child learns how to be entertained by his own mind and imagination? That his childhood solitariness is not at all bad preparation for the day when he must sit in formal meditation, concentrating of his breathing and critically watching how his mind works from moment to moment? Or sit for long hours in the library's stacks, doing research on his dissertation? Nor is it bad conditioning for the life of a writer which, as so many have said, is solitary---but not, I would say, "lonely" in any negative sense. Because solitude, for an only child, *is* as close to him (or her) as a brother or sister. I think only childhood tends to make a person the opposite of gregarious, and perhaps a bit quiet, shy or reserved in social situations, preferring to listen and let others speak. Or at least that's so in my case. Personally, I need time spent alone every day for reflection (away from unwanted external stimuli so I can hear myself think), for study, meditation, or just silently observing Nature (with my dog Nova nearby). But I enjoy people, too, especially intelligent dialogue and experiencing the mystery, the sameness, and the difference in their lives and mine. Alone *with* others describes the life of this only child (and the human condition) pretty well.

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at 9:36 AM
http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/06/one.html

Wednesday, June 1, 2011

FICTION AND THE LIBERATION OF PERCEPTION

We have never lived enough. Our experience is, without fiction, too confined and too parochial. Martha Nussbaum, "Love's Knowledge."

In an article published thirty-one years ago in *Obsidian*, "Philosophy and Black Fiction" (1980), I argued that "the final concern of serious fiction is the liberation of perception." I also stated in that article that, "our experience as black men and women completely outstrips our perception---black life is ambiguous and a kaleidoscope of meanings rich, multi-sided, and what the authentic black writer does is despoil meaning to pin down the freshest interpretation given to him. This is genuine fiction. It is also hermeneutic philosophy, in the sense that the writer is an archaeologist probing the Real for veiled sense."

A third of a century later, it still seems to me that the greatest literary art has an epistemological mission. By now this position should be uncontroversial. I'm not talking about mere "entertainment" (though great fiction certainly entertains), or the garden-variety novel, escapist literature, or fiction as a form of recreation. Rather, I am referring to fiction (and all Saying and Showing) that deepens our knowledge and refines our ways of seeing and experiencing the world.

MARTHA NUSSBAUM

In her often-cited work "Love's Knowledge" (1990), philosopher Martha Nussbaum says, "In a sense Proust is right to see the literary text as an 'optical instrument' through which the reader becomes a reader of his or her own heart." A similar understanding of fiction is found in William Faulkner's Nobel prize acceptance speech, and in Saul Bellow's essay "Culture Now." Nussbaum continues, saying, "One obvious answer was suggested by Aristotle: we have never lived enough. Our experience is, without fiction, too confined and too parochial...

"All living is interpreting; all action requires seeing the world *as* something. So, in this sense, no life is 'raw'..." (In other words, our experience is already *cooked* by our conditioning, education, intentionality, prejudices, assumptions and presuppositions.) "The point," says Nussbaum, "is that in the activity of literary imagining we are led to imagine and describe with greater precision, focusing our attention on each word, feeling each event more keenly---whereas much

of actual life goes by without that heightened awareness, and is thus, in a sense, not fully or thoroughly lived."

JOHN GARDNER

The late John Gardner offered a similar vision of fiction in "On Moral Fiction." There, he states, "In fiction we stand back, weigh things as we do not have time to do in life; and the effect of great fiction is to temper real experience, modify prejudice, humanize...When the writer accepts unquestioningly someone else's formulation of how and why people behave, he is not thinking but dramatizing some other man's theory: that of Freud, Adler, Laing, or whomever. But the final judgment must come from the writer's imagination."

And that imagination, according to Percy Shelley in "A Defense of Poetry," is "the great instrument of moral good." Shelley argues further that, "Poetry defeats the curse which binds us to be subjected to the accident of surrounding impressions...It makes us the inhabitants of a world to which the familiar is in chaos. It reproduces the common universe of which we are portions and percipients, and it purges from our inward sight the film of familiarity which obscures from us the wonder of our being."

Recently, on April 27, I had the very great pleasure of discussing the above aesthetic positions with philosophers Ron Moore and Sara Goering in a special event, entitled "Moral Imagination," sponsored by the Philosophy Department at the University of Washington. If readers would like to view a tape of that rousing evening discussion, the link is:
Moral Imagination: A discussion of literature and moral awareness on Vimeo

MICHAEL BOYLAN

Last fall, philosopher Michael Boylan, who is my co-author for the book *Philosophy, An Innovative Introduction: Fictive Narrative, Primary Texts, and Responsive Writing* (Westview

Press, 2010), and I also did an hour-long discussion for Philosophy TV on the relationship between philosophy and literature, on how they are and have always been sister disciplines. The link for viewing this discussion is:
Michael Boylan and Charles Johnson « Philosophy TV

It should be obvious that such perception-liberating art is the antithesis of ideology, cliched thinking, the unimaginative, and works that do no more than recycle pre-established or second-hand meanings and interpretations of our experience. Real fiction makes the familiar *un*familiar. It shakes up calcified ways of seeing. It activates in us a Beginner's Mind, as Buddhists would say. And we can never again think of a subject, event or experience without recalling the work of art---the gift---that caused scales to fall away from our eyes. So yes, I still stand firmly by the position I took in 1980.

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at 10:11 AM
http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/06/fiction-and-liberation-of-perception.html

Saturday, June 4, 2011

NEW FICTION NOVELISTS

Is there a connection between my work and those writers once described as "New Fiction novelists"? By now I suspect that readers of E-Channel will recognize how much I dislike labels that limit our experience of phenomenon. At their very best, labels can only be provisional; at their worst, they are like the bed of Procrustes.

In 1974, the same year I published *Faith and the Good Thing*, Joe David Bellamy published a collection of interviews entitled *The New Fiction* (University of Illinois Press). Those young (at the time) writers he interviewed were John Barth, Joyce Carol Oates, William H. Gass, Donald Barthelme, Ronald Sukenick, Tom Wolfe, John Hawkes, Susan Sontag, Ishmael Reed, Jerzy Kosinski, John Gardner, and Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. Quite a diverse list, wouldn't you say? Everything from traditionalists to Sur-fictionists, meta-fictionists, and satirists.

In his preface, Bellamy said:

"Whether the new fiction of the last decade represents a "breakthrough" into fruitful new vistas or the 'exhaustion' of a decadent, spent art form, it is, at least, drastically different from the fiction written immediately before by the great American modernists (as they have come to be called) and is based apparently upon totally revised assumptions about the nature and purpose of art....Concurrent with the outpouring of some remarkable innovative fiction during this period, of course, numbers of writers continued to work skillfully in traditional modes, relying basically on nineteenth-century conventions for journalistic---or other nonfictional---purposes. In other words, amazing, sweeping, and unanticipated as its appearance has proven to be, the new American fiction is by no means monolithic, ubiquitous, or the result of any conspiracy, though it is no less amazing for that."

In constructing his definition of the "new fiction," Bellamy contrasts it to the literary naturalism that arose in the late 19th century. Think of Stephen Crane's "The Open Boat" (1897) and "Maggie: A Girl of the Streets" (1893), a work so scandalously "realistic" in depicting the protagonist's sordid world that Crane had to publish it himself and only one bookseller carried it. Crane was known for journalistic authenticity---he knew a "madam" of a brothel, he himself was lost in an open boat, but apparently didn't need to go to war in order to write *The Red Badge of Courage*. I think at this juncture we need to distinguish between "realism" and "naturalism." You find the former in all sorts of literary traditions dating back thousands of years, even in fantasy writing where, say, a knight's shield may be described with great fidelity to detail and "realism" before he fights a dragon.

But literary naturalism is a specific theory of how the world works, physically and psychologically, one that by necessity had to be revised on the basis of new evidence. It arose as a literary movement between the 1880s and 1940, attempting to explain "scientifically" the underlying social and environmental forces that shaped a person or a character. In an important development in philosophy coeval with the rise of literary naturalism, many thinkers saw the flaws and dangers in the scientific sources this literary movement drew from (some Darwin,

probably some Freud). For example, phenomenologist Edmund Husserl critiqued the "Natural Attitude" (*Einstellung*) as being the everyday unreflective attitude of naive belief in the existence of the world, a rationalism which either presupposes abstract principles or the uncriticized results of science, which is scientism. Most fiction even today, I would say, is written from the standpoint of the Natural Attitude---an attitude, as Buddhist teacher Bhikku Bodhi tells us, that is plastered over with layers of conceptual paint and lacks the radical empiricism involved in "taking stock" of each and every one of our experiences.

Naturalism as a literary movement, then, is problematic because of the presuppositions in its ontological model of Nature, which generally is Newtonian physics (the classical model) that collapsed due to the work of Einstein and relativity theory, (we do not have "space" *and* "time", but rather the phenomenon known as space/time), and lead Alfred North Whitehead to publish *Process and Reality* (1929), a major work of "process philosophy" that attempted to account metaphysically for the discoveries of quantum physics. Interesting, too, is how Whitehead's work offers a defense of theism, though his God has no resemblance to that of traditional religions. (And some commentators find parallels with Buddhist *abhidharma* or metaphysical writings in his work.) Even earlier, William James in his Gifford Lectures delivered at the University of Edinburgh (1901-02), which became *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*, chastised the scientists in his audience for their dismissing the value of religion.

The "New Fiction" that Bellamy sees merging in the 1960s and early '70s is a fiction sensitive to the philosophical and scientific naivety in some exhausted, "decadent, spent" modernist fiction. As so often happens in literary history, it was a reaction by a new generation of American writers to the rules and reasoning they inherited from their predecessors (just as Sherwood Anderson, D.H. Lawrence and others reacted against the definitions of the modern short story as defined by Poe, O'Henry and critic Brander Matthews) and the unquestioned dominance of literary naturalism for three generations. It was sensitive to other, non-western cultures and how they described reality. It questioned the very *foundations* of the kind of fiction written between the 1880s and 1940s, even its writerly techniques, which embodied an uncritical *weltanschauung.* Many works by these authors were self-referential or deliberately self-conscious, shattering the illusion that stories were anything other than a linguistic game; some of the writers were anti-realists (in the philosophical sense of that term), acknowledging that a work of fiction is always a deliberately constructed artifice, never a mirror held up to reality. (See William H. Gass's brilliant essays on writing in *Fiction and the Figures of Life*.) How could it not be thus when in so many ways our understanding of the enveloping physical universe was so radically transformed? The response of, say, a John Gardner was to sometimes return to the pre-naturalistic tale-telling tradition.

Personally, I have the same great affection for the tale---an obvious fabulation---as a literary form in which aspects of spirituality can be explored without having to justify the presence of the life of the spirit in a story. I feel the same way about science fiction, first because it can address cutting-edge scientific discoveries and, secondly, because sci-fi over the course of its long history often assumes the conventions of the tale. But when a story demands a naturalistic approach (which most readers are conditioned to prefer---I'm thinking of readers who say tedious and tiring things like "Did that really happen? Your character used drugs, do you *use* drugs?"),

like the ones in *Soulcatcher and Other Stories*, I render the fiction in those familiar naturalistic terms and that in tradition.

But, yes, some of my early work in the 1970s deliberately exhibits meta-fictional or New Fiction characteristics, *Oxherding Tale* in particular. Perhaps the best thing to say in 2011 is that we are all, in one way or another, New Fiction writers now.

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at 5:15 AM
http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/06/new-fiction-novelists.html

Saturday, June 4, 2011

THE WORLD ACCORDING TO JOHN GARDNER

JOHN GARDNER

In an interview I did with writer John Gardner on January 21, 1973, he made one of the most thought-provoking and prophetic statements in his entire career. He said:

"I think a certain kind of America is doomed, though something greater may be coming. The novelist and only the novelist thrives on breakdown, because that's the moment when he can analyze the beauty of the values that are falling and rising...The end of a great civilization is always a great moment for fiction. When the old England at the end of the nineteenth century fell, along came Dickens; when Russia fell apart, along came Tolstoy...One looks forward to the fall of great civilizations because it gives us great art."

Gardner delivered this statement in rather general and vague terms that he hoped we would use as a tool for understanding the relationship between civilizational collapse and great art. But his words concealed more---racially and politically---than they revealed. In 1973, JG was actually talking about what he saw as the "breakdown" of civilization in *our* time, specifically the way the White Anglo-Saxon Protestant America of his youth was "doomed" because of changes brought about in the late 1960s and early '70s by first the Civil Rights Movement, then the Black Power Movement.

You might not discover any of this from looking at his fiction, for despite his large body of work he never mentions the Civil Rights Movement---not once in his stories, as far as I can see, and I've read everything he wrote---as if that monumental sea-change in American history never took place. His work never mentions Martin Luther King Jr. or any of the black heroes that ended legal segregation in the United States and made it possible for me to study with him at an American university. Furthermore, there are in his novels and stories no black characters, at least no major ones, and the only people of color who appear and are portrayed respectfully, now and then, are native Americans---or rather JG's somewhat romantic *idea* of native Americans. That omission is striking---or glaring---because, according to figures I've encountered, whites make up only 17% of the world's population and people color account for 83%.

Gardner was, it must be said, the product of a farming community in upstate New York in the 1930s and '40s. He didn't know black history which is, of course, synonymous with American history. He said he spoke twelve languages, but he knew little about Far Eastern cultures, and he had an almost visceral aversion to Buddhism, which surfaced when I wrote *Oxherding Tale*. He once told me he just *had* to let me know that his farmer father believed that black people could talk to mules. (Why he had to let me know that bit of superstitious ignorance is beyond me.) And I also remember Gardner telling me how upset and baffled he was when he received a letter from a local chapter of the Ku Klux Klan that expressed praise for and approval of his writing.

But Gardner was far from being a racist. Eurocentric, yes, a true Western, Protestant, Republican patriot. But not racist. He told me how he and his first wife fled early from a dinner party hosted by poet James Dickey when that writer launched into an ugly imitation of James Baldwin, using butchered, pidgin speech. I think he saw, nervously, in 1973 what was coming---an America that by the mid-21st century will no longer have a white majority, a once dominant nation that will in this new millennium lose its hegemony and be (at best) "first among equals" when nations that have thrown off colonialism and made rapid progress in modernization---like India, China, South Korea, Japan---assert their new muscle in international affairs.

That sense of the white West being "doomed" (as Malcolm X predicted in the '60s in his published lectures entitled *The End of White Supremacy*) runs as an undercurrent in Gardner's first bestseller, *The Sunlight Dialogues* (1972). Read my 2006 introduction for the novel's reissue by New Directions Books, and you'll see Gardner's dramatization of this American decline writ small in the story of the Hodge family on whose land at the novel's end poor Negroes have taken up residence.

To his credit, Gardner worked to better understand the racial, cultural, gender, and gay Other until the end of his life---to increase his empathy for people raised differently from himself, as he demonstrated in his essay "Meditational Fiction" on the Buddhist-flavored stories of Kikuo Itaya in *Tengu Child*. He was the best, most insightful teacher of the craft of writing in our time. And he was generous, even self-sacrificing toward his students from all backgrounds. Had I not met Gardner, who boldly cleared a path for me into the literary world, I would not be a writer doing these E-Channel posts today.

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at 12:37 PM
http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/06/world-according-to-john-gardner.html

Wednesday, June 8, 2011

CHARLES JOHNSON TALKS ABOUT STANLEY CROUCH

My first contact with cultural critic Stanley Crouch took the form of a phone call I received in 1982. He was at *The Village Voice* then, was reviewing my novel *Oxherding Tale*, and wanted to speak with me about it. As we talked, I immediately felt I was conversing with a kindred spirit, a very original thinker who had read the most accomplished works of fiction, American and foreign, and was as troubled as I was (and as many were, though many kept silent about it) by the way uncritical, prefabricated political ideologies of one sort or another had replaced depth of thought and meaning, breadth of vision, originality and invention, and technical mastery in works by some black writers (No, I'll mention no names) heavily promoted (again for political reasons) in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

I discovered he was a cultural fighter in the class of heavyweights, one not afraid to point out that "The Emperor or Empress isn't wearing any clothes." In this country, we almost never speak honestly about race. As a Buddhist, I view that subject as residing at the white-hot center of Samsara as a lived illusion. And Crouch, being a black American writer and critic, recognized instantly when another black writer---the opportunists and race hustlers---was pulling wool over the eyes of white readers unfamiliar with black American history and culture; or exploiting fashionable trends; or simply lying for personal profit.
He understood that neither black nationalism nor the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s had a monopoly on black thought in America, indeed, that this separatist, one-dimensional strain of thought was not even dominant among black Americans, although some naive white readers predictably found it to be thrilling. (And many today who are teachers K-12 and in colleges, white and black, prefer to give their students exclusively a diet of such self-pitying material devoted to the idea of victimization.) My own parents and kinfolk, for example, would have listened politely to it, then excused themselves and gone back to the real business of life, *i.e.*, working to create a better future for their children, to honor their own mothers and fathers, to work at their own self improvement in mind, body and spirit, and take advantage of the very tangible opportunities America offered in the post-Civil Rights period, just as African immigrants do today, the ones who say of alienated, bitter, native-born black people that "Where they see walls, we see windows; where they see obstacles, we see opportunities."

Crouch wrote a spot-on, two-page review of *Oxherding Tale* that led directly to it being leased for a paperback edition by Grove Press. And so began a spirited, long-distance dialogue, between Seattle and New York City, a friendship of mutual support and collegiality that continues to this day. Along with my literary agents, he was my guest in November, 1990 at the

National Book Award ceremony when *Middle Passage* received that prize, and his description of that night has been read by many people.

Like his mentor, the very distinguished author Albert Murray, like Jerald Walker and James Alan McPherson, Crouch has a heroic vision of black American life and history. To be perfectly honest, it's impossible *not* to have such a vision if one has studied the way black men and women since the 17th century have overcome simply preposterous obstacles during centuries of slavery (when they were demonized as soulless and less than human) and decades of racial segregation (when that dehumanization continued) in a struggle taken up by each generation of black people until it led to the election of the first black president in 2008. He has no stomach for a "tragic" vision of black life, or one that whines and wallows in pathos and victimization, for those conceptualizations only invoke pity. And close on the heels of pity comes contempt (for black people or anyone seen as unable to pull their own weight). As Crouch has said often, "I'm not on the left wing or the right wing. I'm on the *free* wing."

He understands---as every generation did before the late 1960s---that black Americans, relentlessly disenfranchised and denied for so long in this nation, became creative grand masters of the art of "making a way out of no way," the agents that forced the United States to live up to the ideals in its sacred, secular documents (the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution), resulting in a more fully realized practice of democracy and freedom, which *every* oppressed group discriminated against in this country---women, Asians, Hispanics, people of the Jewish persuasion, gays and the trans-gendered---has benefited from for the last fifty years. Crouch, bless him, understood that this was a noble, ennobling, and quintessentially American struggle that liberated *every*one from the cage of color; he refused to let us forget that (for we *can* be a willfully forgetful nation), and he inspired many of us to *never* back down to bullies, ideologues, bigots, opportunists, and fools when the truth (and the well-being of our children and loved ones) is at stake.

That very old understanding of black life became muddied in the late 1970s and early '80s. It took a cosmopolitan and courageous author like Stanley Crouch to clear the toxic air and, as one of my best friends puts it, "get the room *right*." But as he always reminds me, our job is not yet done. The infantilization of American culture continues every day. Our job as writers is to relentlessly address this, and with our gloves off, if need be. In fact, we have *more* work to do in this regard in the decade after 9/11 than we had in the early 1980s. When future historians write about our conflicted, often confused period of American literature and culture, the name Stanley Crouch will stand out boldly as that of a writer who recognized *go-nihaara* (Sanskrit for bullshit) whenever he saw it, and called it by its proper name.

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at 5:53 PM
http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/06/charles-johnson-talks-about-stanley.html

Friday, June 10, 2011

FROM GARDNER TO JOHNSON TO GUTERSON

E.Ethelbert Miller asks, "John Gardner had a tremendous influence on your life. But who have you been 'Gardner' to? What successful writer has been influenced by your teaching and claims you as their key mentor?"

This question is almost too easy to answer.

DAVID GUTERSON

A few nights ago, on June 7, I had the great pleasure of attending the showing of a new, very funny film entitled "Old Goats." It was created by a talented, young film-maker named Taylor Guterson, the son of writer David Guterson, who was my former student in the late 1970s and '80s, and sometimes kindly refers to me as his mentor. His son's film was presented as part of the Seattle International Film Festival. The Egyptian Theater on Capitol Hill where it played was packed. The story, a character study of sorts about three, comic old men who live on Bainbridge Island (which is home for the Guterson family), was a hilarious and compassionate crowd-pleaser. And it certainly pleased me to see my erstwhile writing student's son following in the steps of his successful father, author of the record-breaking best-selling novel *Snow Falling on Cedars;* and more recent novels such as *The Other, Our Lady of the Forest, and East of the Mountains; Family Matters: Why Homeschooling Makes Sense,* a work of non-fiction; and the short story collection, *The Country Ahead of Us, the Country Behind.* (And, I should add, one of his *other* sons recently founded a brewery in Portland, Oregon.)

Among the hundreds (if not thousands) of students I worked with at the University of Washington and elsewhere between 1976 and 2009, David Guterson was the most hard-working, talented, and dedicated to his craft night and day. We have the same literary agent, Georges Borchardt, who once said jokingly to me, "Gardner begat Johnson who begat Guterson." This was funny, but not entirely true insofar as every writer at the end of the day (or after years of long hours working alone) is the only one responsible for creating his or her own distinctive, literary vision. At best, a mentor can only give different forms of support and encouragement until the younger writer finds his or her enthusiastic readers. (And make no mistake, when a writer "shows up" with a commercially and critically successful book, that person didn't start writing yesterday; he or she has most likely been laboring for at least a decade in workshops and on their own.) But, yes, if memory serves, writer Stanley Elkin introduced Gardner to the literary

agency of Georges and Anne Borchardt, often called the "Cadillac" of literary agencies because---well, because it is *classy*, and Georges has been knighted and honored often by the French government for his contributions to literature. Gardner did the same for me as Elkin did for him, and I introduced the agency to Guterson.

It feels a little odd for me to write about David Guterson because I've known him for so long, and seen the arc of his career, from UW student to brand-name literary writer. From his earliest college years, he was serious, mature, and skillfully met head-on the challenge of any writing assignment. Even back then, he was a practicing grown-up. I attribute his being the ideal student to, in part, his total devotion to not only his craft but also to his family, which is first and foremost among his priorities. As the title of his non-fiction book indicates, he and his wife Robin home-schooled their children, *i.e.*, they took the business of educating their young so seriously (David for some time taught high school) that they were willing to invest their time and energy *every day* in the task of integrating learning with the love a child experiences in the home.

We both have a long-standing interest in Buddhism and, I guess, a special affection for our daughters. He once said, memorably, "Having a daughter is like falling in love for a second time." I think he's fallen in love again because he and his lovely wife adopted a few years ago a beautiful girl from Ethiopia.

Every teacher who feels indebted to the men and women who taught and helped him hopes one day to have a student who establishes himself (or herself) in the discipline they share, and maintains daily the highest professional and personal standards. Such a student liberates his teachers, I believe, for his success says that what the teacher tried to offer in and outside the classroom, however large or small that may be, was not in vain.
Indeed, after *Snow Falling on Cedars* was published, I think I said to David that I was finally free---in terms of a teacher's obligation to transmit what he has received to a member of the next generation--and so I really didn't need to teach any more. In other words, one of my favorite students was on his way. And since then he has built---and continues to build---his own many-roomed mansion of creative gifts for the enjoyment and edification of others.

These days he is publishing poetry, and in October his new novel *Ed King* will be published by Knopf. This is, as a reviewer once said of another book, "shoes-in-the-dirt," realistic fiction in the grand tradition of, say, a Sinclair Lewis: a meticulously researched, suspenseful story that puts contemporary flesh on Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*. I was so engaged when I started the galley, that I read the first 143 pages in a single sitting, for it is also a powerful comment on the way we live today. If I were you, I would pre-order a copy right now.

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at 3:57 AM
http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/06/from-gardner-to-johnson-to-guterson.html

Saturday, June 11, 2011

THE WOUNDS THAT CREATE OUR WORK

"A psychological wound is helpful, if it can be kept in partial control, to keep the novelist driven." John Gardner, *On Becoming A Novelist.*

Does a writer need tragedy or loss as a motivation for doing his or her work? Is some sort of "wound" required in the life of the artist? We encounter this idea about creative people so often that it has the status of being
a cliché. For example, in *On Becoming A Novelist*, John Gardner writes:

"Some fatal childhood accident for which one feels responsible and can never fully forgive oneself; a sense that one never quite earned one's parents' love; shame about one's origins---belligerent defensive guilt about one's race or country upbringing or the physical handicaps of one's parents---or embarrassment about one's own physical appearance: all these are promising signs. It may or may not be true that happy, well-adjusted children can become great novelists, but insofar as guilt or shame bend the soul inward they are likely, under the right conditions (neither too little discomfort nor too much), to serve the writer's project."

JOHN GARDNER

With great sadness we understand why Gardner began the above paragraph with the example of a "fatal childhood accident for which one feels responsible and can never fully forgive oneself." When he was 11-years-old, he was given the chore of returning a cultipacker to his parents' farm from a neighbor's place. His 6-year-old brother Gilbert rode on the drawbar that linked the cultipacker to the tractor young JG was driving. Gilbert was killed when the tractor ran out of gas, the engine stopped with a jerk and he was thrown to the ground in front of the cultipacker, which rolled over him. This terrible event haunted Gardner all his life, and he writes movingly about it in his short story "Redemption." His parents always insisted that he was not the cause of Gilbert's death, but JG apparently did not entirely believe that. The tragedy followed him through life. There were times when he would be driving and the entire awful tableau would appear before his eyes again, right there superimposed on the windshield, and he would have to pull over to the side of the road until it passed.

I know---and you know, too---a great many stories about writers and artists, past and present, that contain some form of childhood trauma. An emptiness or scars or a wound so deep that the writer can only find consolation for his (or her) grief and suffering through the act of creating. While I don't have in my own life a single, painful event that was defining like JG's, I believe I understand what is common (and positive) throughout all the examples he presents: namely, that in order to create it is helpful if a person feels in some sense that he or she is a social outsider. The outsider is driven to question everything in the enveloping social world, to adopt a critical stance in the face of those things familiar and commonly accepted, to sometimes or often feel himself "at a distance" from things and, most important of all, to carefully---sometimes obsessively---observe the behavior of others, which he can then describe in a work of fiction with detail and nuance.

At first glance, Gardner's thesis is compelling. (And it seems of a piece with William Gass's statement that, "I need hate to heat my art.") I can think of many examples to support it, from James Baldwin and Jean-Paul Sartre who felt they were physically ugly to the missing or absent fathers in the lives of August Wilson and Ralph Ellison, which literary scholars have identified as wounds that fueled their writing. But something feels slightly wrong with this picture. We need to examine it more closely.

In every example that Gardner gives, the writer is looking at himself through the eyes of others. He is defining his identity not simply by a loss or tragedy that took place, but on the basis of what *others* think about it. He is not free. He is enslaved to their judgments, and one gets the feeling that he (or she) creates in order to change the real or imagined opinions of others about who and what he is. Indeed, the creative work that springs from the artist's wound and insecurity may well be a desperate bid for love. The protagonist Allan Jackson in my story "The Sorcerer's Apprentice" faces a dilemma similar to this. He hungers to heal his family's racial and individual wounds through magic (art). In other words, he is *attached* to those wounds and also to his "identity" as a sorcerer, two ego-driven things that he eventually must learn to "let go"; put another way, he must discover a new, different relationship with himself and his talent.

To a very large degree, then, Gardner is describing a form of neurosis. Notice how he says in a parenthetical aside that guilt or shame must involve "neither too little discomfort nor too much." Well, we know---and sadly---what happens to the writer or artist when there is "too much" guilt, shame, and discomfort. Or when he fails to keep his wounds under "partial control." Between or during periods of creativity, he or she may blunt that discomfort with drugs, alcohol, sexual adventures (and sometimes all three at once), or some other form of self-destructive addiction. One cannot help but feel that this description of the writer's wound as the basis for creativity is touching only on the surface of the malaise and not penetrating to its roots.

It is the wound, Gardner says, that makes the writer "driven." And there, my friends, resides the problem. This kind of writer knows no peace. Only a chronic, free-floating sense of "discomfort." Unlike Gardner, I, being a Buddhist, don't see "identity" as any sort of enduring substance or essence. (And I greatly value *shanti,* or peace.) Our past is *gone* and can never be recovered---except through memory, which itself is a phenomenon that imaginatively plays with and reshapes over time our prior experiences. Furthermore, a Buddhist knows better than to shape his sense of self (when, in fact, there is no self) on the basis of other people's opinions.

Long ago, you may have done something that made you feel guilt or shame, but you are no longer that person *here* and *now*.

So I find myself taking the position that, yes, "happy, well-adjusted children" or adults *can* create great art, especially if they have a spiritual practice that keeps them on an even keel. Guilt and shame are not the *only* experiences that "bend the soul inward." Therefore, writers need not be attached to either their "wound" or the work it gives rise to. Instead, their work can spring from an abiding peace and feeling of thanksgiving, like these E-Channel posts; from the joy to be found in living mindfully and exercising their hard-won skills because doing so feels so danged good (and doesn't involve anyone else), the way world-class athletes feel when they are relaxed or at play; and from the inexhaustible pleasures of the ever mysterious creative process.

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at 2:12 AM
http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/06/wounds-that-create-our-work.html

Sunday, June 12, 2011

THE PHILOSOPHICAL REASONS FOR DOING THE HANKY PANKY

Why are so many powerful men these days being accused of and exposed for sexual misbehaving? Tiger Woods. John Edwards. Anthony Weiner. Eliot Spitzer ("Love Client Number Nine"). Arnold Schwarzenegger. Dominique Strauss-Kahn. Mahmoud Abdel Salam Omar. These are not stupid men---all rose to the top of their professions and politics---though obviously their actions reek of a stupidity that is reprehensible in every case and downright risible in some. (No fiction writer would be believed if he named one of his philandering characters *Weiner*.)

The easy answer, and probably the best one, is that these Alpha males are all people of very poor character and judgment. I believe that to be the case, but after condemning these figures, I want to look for a moment at the *ground* against which their travails stand out in such stark, pathetic relief.

I'm talking about contemporary American culture, which is incoherent, inconsistent, and sends out very mixed, ethical messages. On the one hand, what we expect from our citizens is maturity and civilized behavior based on self-control, reason, discrimination, respect for others, and restraint. Yet, on the other hand, that same society relentlessly bombards everyone, young and old, 24/7 with propaganda steeped in sex and violence, those lowest common denominator twins guaranteed to always capture our attention, and especially the interest of those who are weak-minded, weak-willed, emotionally immature, and sadly lacking any spiritual practice. Think about it. Sex in America is presented as a form of recreation, and sometimes as a commodity. The sexual other is presented, not as another complex and mysterious *subject*, but as an *object* promising to satisfy our appetites. I'm not a prude (my fiction and comic art probably show that way too well), but I find it remarkable that you cannot look at a magazine, a movie, a television program, an advertisement, many billboards, most forms of entertainment including contemporary fiction and music videos, anything on the internet, and *not* be encouraged to feel desire. Advertising has always worked that way. Desire sells. Sex sells. In 1964, Marxist Herbert Marcuse had some rather interesting things to say on this subject---the necessary creation of *false* desires by a capitalist economy---in *One-Dimensional Man*.

But our culture in recent decades has ratcheted up an adolescent fascination with the venereal far beyond what was seen in the '60s. Pornography is mainstream, and porn stars are celebrities. Polite conversation, newspaper articles, and the routines of comedians contain the p-word, f-word, and d-word with such ease we don't even notice it anymore. And how many "celebrities" have their sex-tapes? (What kind of mind produces one of *those*?) Matters become yet more disturbing when those twins, sex and violence, are *merged* along with matters once seen as taboo supposedly for the sake of being "cutting edge," or avant-garde, or "pushing the envelope" on what can be imagined and sold for profit. (Think of recent music videos by Kanye West, Lady Gaga, and Rihanna.) I don't have space in this post, or even the interest, to fully catalogue this bizarre phenomenon, one of late cultural decadence, in which the most banal, spiritless, materialistic, selfish, leering, demeaning-to-women, and ego-driven versions of sex have seemingly replaced spiritual life in secular culture, because I think you understand my premise. And what is my conclusion?

Put simply, it is this:

The men mentioned in the first paragraph of this post deserve every bit of opprobrium they have received. But, like my character Flo Hatfield in *Oxherding Tale*, they are to a certain degree victims of both self-inflicted stupidity and a cultural *zeitgeist* that encourages, day in day out, that very stupidity. Their consciousness has been "handled," manipulated, and corrupted by egregious and ubiquitous influences in a society that cynically commodifies the healthy intimacy between two people who love and are committed in long term relationships to each other's happiness and well-being. We understand, now that their surreptitious deeds are plastered on the cover of every supermarket scandal rag, that these sadly one-dimensionalized men were not free. They, like Flo, were in bondage (pun intended.)They were probably never free, for one seldom gets "caught" for a first-time offense; rather, the behavior that leads to the loss of face tends to be part of a pattern reinforced over time and *each* time a person thinks he gets away with something and suffers no consequences from it. Their example should make us feel appalled yet also self-reflective, for we are all fish swimming in the same culturally polluted waters as these broken, embarrassed men. We should also feel sadness for the pain they have caused themselves and an ever-widening circle of others that include their spouses, children, parents, friends, kinfolk and in-laws, former admirers, coworkers, and everyone who counted on them to use wisely and responsibly their influence and power. This is a pain that through the young people in their lives will be experienced for generations to come.

As I think about them, I'm reminded of something that occurs to my fictitious Martin Luther King Jr., in the novel *Dreamer*. When he broods on the rumors (and facts) of his extramarital affairs, the thought comes to him that, *The challenge of the spiritual was simply this: to be good, truly moral, and in control of oneself for this moment only.*

There is no other moment with which we have to concern ourselves.

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at 3:16 AM
http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/06/philosophical-reasons-for-doing-hanky.html

Monday, June 13, 2011

MENAGERIE, A CHILD'S FABLE BY CHARLES JOHNSON

Every culture I've studied has in its storytelling tradition the animal fable. In the West, we immediately think of Aesop's fables, Orwell's *Animal Farm*, and native American stories when this form is mentioned, and in the East we remember the Jātaka tales. The form is old, very old, and totemic. (I've read that Aesop chose it in order to disguise his commentary on political life in his time and thereby avoid the wrath of the authorities.) So I always felt that somewhere in my body of work there should be at least one philosophical story in which all the characters are animals. Over the decades, "Menagerie: A Child's Fable" seems to continue to be a popular story that readers enjoy interpreting many ways, especially politically. I just noticed that there is a Study Guide for it on the internet, and Symphony Space has a recording of it read by Gloria Foster for their "Selected Shorts" audio-tapes.

The idea for the story came to me in the early '80s when I felt concerned about what I saw as the increasing balkanization of American society and culture. That was during Reagan's first term when the "Culture Wars" reached a boiling point. The story is set in a Seattle pet shop. Its conflict arises when the somewhat cruel owner of the shop, Mr. Tilford, simply doesn't appear one day, which leaves the animals inside trapped and on their own.
Existentially, the disappearance of the pet shop owner, who kept order, is for these animals equivalent to the death of God. (Yes, the sub-title for the story, "A Child's Fable," is tongue-in-cheek.) But even though he never returns, the story's loyal and pious protagonist, Berkeley the watchdog, desperately hopes he will make a "second coming" and save them all. The watchdog is no rocket scientist or brain surgeon. He lives by faith. Waiting for Tilford's return, believing he *must* return some day, Berkeley does everything he can to keep the various caged animals alive. He tries to stand-in for Tilford but, being a dog, what he can do is limited. As I was writing the story, I kept thinking of a statement by Edmund Burke that has haunted me for decades:

"Men are qualified for civil liberty in exact proportion to their disposition to put moral chains upon their own appetites...Society cannot exist unless a controlling power upon will and

appetite be placed somewhere, and the less of it there is within, the more there is without. It is ordained in the eternal constitution of things that men of intemperate minds cannot be free."

Berkeley has his nemesis in Monkey, a clever instigator who feels the watchdog keeping everyone caged to maintain order is fascist. Among all the caged animals, he is closest to man or humankind on the evolutionary scale. The ape (think of the old phrase "God's ape," which is a reference to the Devil) is an eloquent and persuasive speaker; he convinces Berkeley to release every creature in the shop, arguing that democracy and civil liberty are the only fair political and social arrangements. The watchdog hopes with all his heart that Monkey is right.

But, as Chinua Achebe might say (or Yeats), things begin to "fall apart" as the days wear on and the food supply becomes scarce. Needless to say, the beasts in Tilford's pet shop do not "police" themselves, as Burke recommended. Each species in the shop resembles a tribe. When scarcity descends upon them, they abandon any semblance of the share values required for democracy and equality---which Berkeley has tried to maintain---and divide themselves along the lines of species and gender. Some animals raid the food set aside for others, like the more helpless and vulnerable fish who cannot leave their fishbowls. Then comes cross-species rape and the likelihood of genetic mutations. As violence, chaos, and a dark, Darwinian "survival of the fittest" approach increases and the pet shop catches on fire, the story moves toward its tragic ending, and Berkeley just before his death ironically realizes that only one creature will probably survive the conflagration: Tortoise, the shop's resident Taoist whose habit is to retreat into his protective shell (a metaphor for meditation or monastic retreat) whenever conflict arises among the other animals (*i.e.*, in the social world).

Democracies strikes me as being flexible, but a balance of forces and shared values and the abandonment of tribalism must be maintained from one generation to the next. The dangers to such a system can be many (Think of Eisenhower's famous warning about the problem posed by a "military-industrial complex"). In the Middle East, the experiment with democracy will have to find a solution for tribalism and the very old conflict between Sunni and Shiite Muslims. Europe faces its own version of a dilemma posed by democracy: namely, German Chancellor Angela Merkel's announcement in October, 2010 that in her country, "This multicultural approach, saying that we simply live side by side and live happily with each other has failed. Utterly failed." French President Nicolas Sarkozy probably agrees with that.

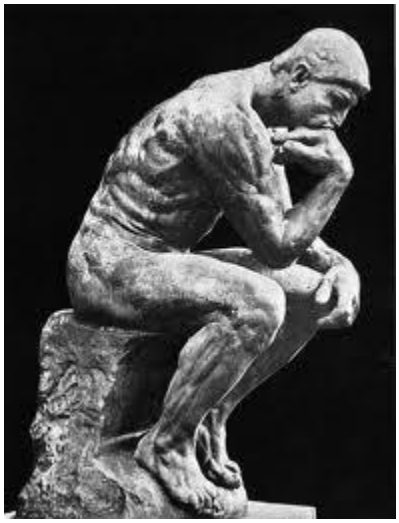
The main point here, I suppose, is that democracy *is* a delicate, on-going experiment. A messy one, as President Barack Obama observed last year. But it is better than any top-down authoritarian alternative that I can think of. And perhaps "Menagerie: A Child's Fable" captures a little bit of its inherent drama and dangers.

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at 9:49 PM
http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/06/menagerie-childs-fable-by-charles.html

Tuesday, June 14, 2011

THE WRITER AND PHILOSOPHY

I do not wish to argue that a novelist or any writer should be a trained philosopher. But I *will* say categorically that I believe *any*one in the western world who wishes to be a serious writer (or thinker) should be acquainted with the geography of Western intellectual history (as trained philosophers are).



The basis for this argument is a no-brainer. Writing does not take place in a historical vacuum. If one hopes to make an artistic or intellectual contribution to Western literature, it follows that one should know what has come before, *i.e.*, what one is making a contribution *to*, and what our predecessors have thought and achieved. Or if you prefer Matthew Arnold's phrasing, "the best that has been known and said in the world." What they have left us is our intellectual inheritance.

Even if a fiction writer limits himself just to reading "stories" (and I can't imagine why someone would do that since our greatest literary predecessor's didn't), he will find that they plunge him into the history of ideas. Can one fully comprehend and appreciate Voltaire's *Candide* with no knowledge of Gottfried Liebnitz; or John Gardner's *Grendel* and Richard Wright's *The Outsider* and "The Man Who Lived Underground" without some understanding of existentialism; or even Charles Olson's poetry with no knowledge of Alfred North Whitehead's "process philosophy"?

I will cop to the fact that over the last forty years I've known a great many fiction-writers who were egotists, loved to hear the sound of their own voice *only*, seemed to feel the cosmos rotated around their wonderful selves and, like far too many Americans, didn't feel they had any need for intellectual self-improvement. Perhaps that comes with the territory of being a writer---a large ego in order to sustain oneself during the vicissitudes in one's career. But there is a truly annoying arrogance and naivety involved when someone says, usually defensively and in an effort to protect his ego, that he doesn't need to know what our ancestors and contemporaries of all races, backgrounds, and cultural orientations have thought and felt. Or when someone believes that his limited personal experience during 80 or 90 years of living (which is

preposterously brief given the 4.5 billion-year-old history of the Earth) can take the place of two or three millennia of intellectual or philosophical discourse.

Furthermore, most of the ideas expressed by writers today are not new. Far too many writers are simply unaware that an idea they believe is original was actually thought and expressed---and presented with eloquence and sophistication---more than 2,000 years before they were born. Writing well is thinking well. That necessarily involves knowing---and caring about---the best thoughts of others. The kind of writer I'm talking about needs not just "personal experience" but also years of systematic study and, most important of all, a sense of humility: that is, the knowledge that better minds than his own have probably addressed the problem or experience or question that he is wrestling with today, and done so memorably, with sophistication and subtlety. You don't need a Ph.D. in Philosophy, I'm saying, to write well. But you *do* need to have an open, inquisitive mind, one eager to learn what others---as many intelligent others as possible---have reported down through the ages on the very human question you are trying to clarify.

When thinking about this matter, I always find myself remembering writer Julius Lester's essay collection, *Falling Pieces of the Broken Sky* (1990*),* and especially what he wisely says in one lovely piece entitled, "The Cultural Canon." Let's listen to *his* historically important voice for a moment:

"The function of education is not to confirm us in who we are; it is to introduce us to all that we are not. Education should overwhelm us to such an extent that we will never again assume that our experience as individuals or as part of a collective, can be equated with human experience. In other words, education should impress us with how vast creation is and how small we are in the midst of it; and in the acceptance of that is the beginning of wisdom.

"My education did not confirm me as a black man; it confirmed me as one who had the same questions as Plato and Aristotle. And my education told me that as a black person, it was not only right to ask those questions, it was even okay to put forward my own answers and stand them next to those of Plato and Aristotle. The cultural canon was presented to me in such a way that I was thrust into that vast and complex mystery which life is; and I graduated from college with an intense and passionate curiosity, which led me to study that which my formal education had omitted---namely, black history and literature and women's history and much, much more.

"It is the function of education to introduce the student to the terrifying unknown and provide not only the intellectual skills to make known the unknown but the emotional stability to withstand the terror when the unknown cannot be made known. Such an experience gives the student the self-confidence to go forth and face that mystery which lies at the core of each of us: Who am I?"

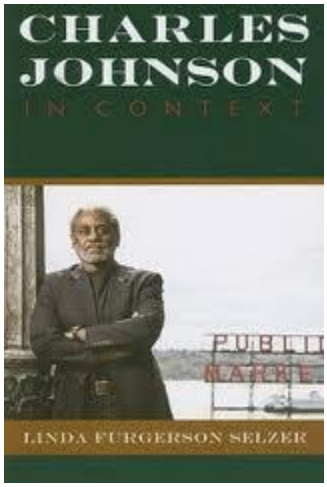
JULIUS LESTER

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at 6:19 AM
http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/06/writer-and-philosophy.html

Thursday, June 16, 2011

ALETHIA , ALETHIA...

Beyond all doubt, the finest and most exhaustive critical explication of my story "Alethia" is by Dr. Linda Furgerson Selzer, an associate professor of English at Pennsylvania State University, in her recent book *Charles Johnson in Context* (University of Massachusetts Press, 2009). With advanced degrees in both philosophy and literature, and with a scholar's background in black American history and culture, Dr. Selzer delivers a reading of that particular work that explores every note and nuance, and almost every philosophical level and allusion in the text. There are times when I read her critical examination of this story, and my other stories and novels, that I get the uncanny feeling she sometimes understands my thought processes and creative decisions better than I do. Her analytic powers at play on the page are a wonder to behold. They set a very high standard for what literary scholarship should be. So there is very little that I can add to her superb examination of "Alethia."



However, I *can* provide some background---previously unknown information--- for the origin of one of the story's two principal characters, student Wendy Barnes, and for some of its literary antecedents.

During my first two years at the University of Washington, I taught an introductory course on black American literature as well as creative writing. That was the original agreement in my contract when I was hired in 1976. (I used a textbook and syllabus kindly provided by my colleague, writer Clarence Major who, I think, had earlier taught the same course at Howard University.) In one of my black American literature classes I had a student, a young, single mother whose name I will not mention. She was bubbly, outgoing, aggressive, and loved to engage her peers in very spirited conversations about black American issues in the Student Union. She was majoring in Communications and her hobby was photography. One afternoon she came to my office to show me a portfolio of her work. As I sat looking at it, she circled around my desk, came up behind me, and gently rested her arms on my shoulders, her mouth close to my ear, talking about each photo as I turned the page. This was---um---a rather awkward situation, but it fast became even more dicey.

I suggested to her that we chat over coffee, maybe the next day, a Thursday. "No," she said, "that's an ugly day," meaning, I guess, that she didn't bother with fixing herself up on Thursdays. And she immediately interpreted my suggestion of a chat over coffee to mean that I was inviting her out to dinner. She told me she would be ready within an hour or two. So there I was, suddenly committed to dinner (a *date*, as one of my colleagues said when she heard about this) with a student when I was a married, 29-year-old, nontenured professor trying mightily every day to keep my head above water. I arrived at her place, which was in off-campus student housing, and she introduced me to her son, a cute kid. Then she showed me other photos she'd taken---one was of a naked, young black man she'd dated, and her remark about him was, "He couldn't wait to get out of his clothes."

At any rate, I took her to dinner. The academic quarter ended. During final exam week I ran into her again on campus. She was, as usual, effervescent, and told me she'd just received her first job in journalism, somewhere back east. Then, there on the street, she threw her arms around me, and gave me a bone-snapping hug that (again) totally obliterated the proper distance cautious professors try to maintain from their students. I never saw her again.

Some time after that encounter when I began work on "Alethia," this former student was lingering in my thoughts, and so I made her the basis for the character Wendy Barnes. But her fictitious avatar is a much brasher, more calculating and manipulative student who roughly guides a shy, self-loathing, 50-year-old, sexually repressed, highly rationalistic black philosophy professor on a journey of self-discovery into a world where "Meaning was in masquerade": a world with forms so fluid they defy his rigid categorizations and, in some cases, even defy identification. He allows himself to be seduced by Wendy, but even more importantly he is seduced by the world's inherent ambiguity---an ambiguity based not so much on things being vague but rather, in Merleau-Ponty's sense, on things having a surplus of meaning. On things being so phenomenologically abundant that they mean *too much*, and for that reason they forever outstrip our perception.

One of Wendy's startling, apocalyptic monologues is a speech that critics have commented on often. She dissects the Professor and the state of contemporary black American life circa 1978 like a frog. In the interest of full disclosure, I have to say that monologue was inspired, in part, by one of Hermann Hesse's brief descriptions of the decay and collapse of European man in one of his essays, but don't ask me which essay, because I've forgotten and would have to dig through 30 years of writer's notebooks to find it. The drug-drenched South Side Chicago party Wendy takes the unnamed professor (with his slight resemblance to Harry Haller) to should have, or so I hoped, a bit of the feel of "The Magic Theater" in Hesse's novel *Steppenwolf*.

As Dr. Selzer's analysis makes clear, "Alethia" is a short story very much informed by the phenomenological tradition. I strongly recommend her analysis for readers.

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at 7:07 AM
http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/06/alethia-alethia.html

Sunday, June 19, 2011

THE NAME GAME

"It is impossible in a discussion to bring in the actual things discussed; we use their names as symbols instead of them; and therefore we suppose that what follows in the names, follows in the things as well...But the two cases (name and things) are not alike." Aristotle, *De Sophisticis Elenchis.*

To name something is to give it a nature. A meaning. Over the decades I've used in my writing all the approved names that have been created for black people, making my selection at any given time usually for poetic or aesthetic reasons. In other words, because one term worked better in respect to the rhythm, alliteration, or the music of a particular sentence than another word. Black. Colored. Negro. African American. In my first collection of cartoons, *Black Humor*, there's even an old drawing circa 1969 that addresses the confusion that arises from our desire or need as a people to rename ourselves every few decades or so as our self-conception changes or evolves.

But this topic is for me a tedious and tiring one. Whenever it comes up, I always want to quote Thomas Hobbes when he says in *Leviathan* that, "And where speech is not, there is neither truth nor falsehood; for speech has something in it like a spider's web." It will probably sound strange for someone who loves language and made his living as a writer and teacher with words to confess that I am highly suspicious of words. Or perhaps it's better to say I appreciate their power to ensorcell and create illusions. My being so cautious is partly based on the different ontology of words and things, but this is not the place to enter fully into that issue. (See my discussion of this in the chapter "Being and Fiction" in *Being and Race: Black Writing Since 1970*, pages 33-40.) As a Buddhist, I look at language somewhat skeptically, as a conventional tool but a limited one, and words as provisional ("providing or serving for the time being only"). Given the experience of change and impermanence, I simply don't believe in enduring "substance" or "essence" of any sort. Two of the dangers of language---traps we fall into often---are reification and (racial, gender, and nationalistic) essentialism.

Sometimes in the past when well-meaning people who didn't want to make a *faux pas* have asked me how I prefer to be referred to---black, colored, Negro, African American or whatever---I would just get playful, and say, "All my friends call me Chuck," which usually caused a startled, amused reaction, because it says what we all know anyway, which is that ultimately you're going to have to deal with me as an individual, not as a general term.

Nevertheless, we find ourselves falling into this energy-draining discussion all the time. Just for the record, these days you won't see me using the term "African American" in my prose. I'm old enough to remember the campaign, led by Jesse Jackson, to install that term as a replacement for "black American" or "Afro American." At that time, a majority of black people polled in January, 1991 said they preferred "black American" to "African American" and, if pollsters had asked me (which they didn't), I would have agreed with the majority back then. But our newspapers and media people rushed to decide that "African American" would be the proper,

journalism style manual term. Many argued that it established an equivalency with terms such as "Irish American" or "Italian American," and therefore was more accurate.

I'm afraid I see the arguments for this neologism as problematic at best and, at worst, as flawed. Africa is a continent of more than 54 sovereign states. If the desire is to establish equivalency with, say, "Irish American," wouldn't it be better to say "Ethiopian American" or "Kenyan American"? John Kerry's wife, Teresa Heinz Kerry, was born in Mozambique. Could she be properly called "African American" then? There is a certain murkiness in the way we use general, abstract terms like "Asian," "African," and "European" that erases the cultural complexity, differences, and outlooks of people when they are lumped together under these labels for the sake of convenience and simplification.

It's easy to see that each of these terms for naming involves not only an interpretation of native-born black people (some of whom in complexion can accurately be called "black" while most others range from shades of brown to tan to white enough to pass as Caucasians) but also a very transparent political agenda or doctrine. "African American" *as* a term contains the desire, which can be historically traced back to the late 19th century and certainly to Marcus Garvey, and which was again very strong in the late 1960s and early '70s in black ideologies like cultural nationalism (and in the '80s in Afrocentrism), to ancestrally link blacks born on these shores with a location most have never experienced or visited. I understand the often admirable political motivations behind this move---we all do---but in each act of naming we should be fully aware of exactly *what* we are doing, *why* we are doing it, and whether it is accurate or violates common sense, intuition, and direct experience.

The prolific writer Charles Mudede, who was born in Zimbabwe and is associate editor for the Seattle-based publication *The Stranger*, has written powerfully over the years about the importance of one's specific tribal affiliation as the traditional basis for an African identity (his family is Manica). If Mudede is right, wouldn't one need to know something about one's individual tribal background to be properly called "African American"? These specifics matter in the *Lebenswelt* (Life-world) or daily lived experience for individuals and groups, and they cannot easily be ignored for the sake of achieving Pan-Africanism or racial unity. I recall an Eritrean student in Washington state in 2003 writing in *The Seattle Times* that "I don't know about 'chitlings' or 'grits.' I don't listen to soul music such as Marvin Gaye or Aretha Franklin...I grew up eating *injera* and listening to *Tigrinya* music...After school, I cook the traditional coffee, called boun, by hand for my mother. It is a tradition shared by mother and daughter."

No doubt the identity politics behind the term "African American" are what led GOP presidential candidate Herman Cain to state just a few days ago that, "I am an American. Black. Conservative...I don't use African American, because I'm American, I'm black and I'm conservative. I don't like people trying to label me. African American is socially acceptable for some people, but I am not some people."

According to one news article, Cain went on to add---counter-punching with identity politics of his own---that he considers himself to be "a black man in America" and feels stronger ties to the United States than to Africa. He suggested his perspective has been informed by the fact that he can trace most of his ancestors to the U.S. and it also "goes back to slavery."

One need not be in the camp of the GOP (as I am not) to question the appropriateness of the term "African American." In his speeches and writing, Martin Luther King Jr. relied heavily on the terms "Negro" and "black," and there was at the time a strategic, political reason for that. Ralph Ellison, and Albert Murray in his very important book *The Omni-Americans*, persuasively argued over and over again for the historical, cultural and existential uniqueness of the black American experience. Neither wished to see that diminished or forgotten. Like King, Ellison, and Murray I *did* grow up knowing chitlings, grits, and the music of Marvin Gaye and Aretha Franklin, which I love. (The singers, not chitlings or grits.) As my body of work amply shows, I've always been open to learning from other cultures (*injera* sounds like it might taste good), and eager to do so. But given contingency, the accidents of birth and chance, only one country can be rightly called my default position: the one in which I was born and raised. Therefore, I tilt toward using the term "black American" whenever I have to make a choice---and my stance toward America is, of course, always critical and questioning. Sometimes it is even oppositional. (Which is a right that comes with my American-ness, a right no African nation has granted me.) For readers interested in a very passionate, heart-felt defense of "black American" as the term we should be using, please take a look at www.blackamericantribe.com, or click on this link:

NATIVE BLACK AMERICAN TRIBE

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at 4:00 AM
http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/06/name-game.html

Monday, June 20, 2011

THE IMAGE KNOWN AS CHARLES JOHNSON

E. Ethelbert Miller asks why there are not many photos of me on the Internet. I'm not sure I can answer that question, but I can say a few things about the sometimes ludicrous subject of author photos.

In 1973, as Viking Press was preparing to publish my first novel, *Faith and The Good Thing*, my editor arranged for me to sit for a photo with Jill Krementz, who (he said) "collected" writers, and was at the time the wife of Kurt Vonnegut Jr. I went to the photo shoot in NYC mainly because I was hoping to bump into Vonnegut, but he was off doing something else that day.That photo was a good one, "flattering," as people concerned about superficial, surface things tend to say.

The author photo I generally use these days was taken by renowned Northwest photographer Mary Randlett for Jim McWilliams's collection of my interviews, *Passing the Three Gates*. University of Washington Press arranged for that one. The picture on the cover of Linda Selzer's work of literary scholarship, *Charles Johnson in Context*, was taken by a local photographer Brian Smale, who was hired by *Smithsonian* magazine to do a photo to accompany my article on Seattle for that publication. That shoot took hours and hours over two days, and it explains why I'm posed with the Pike Place Market---one of the city's iconic locations---in the background.

Other photos were taken on the fly for various books by my former students Gary Hawkes and Nicholas O'Connell, and once by my daughter. After the long labor of creating a book, the photo is truly the *last* thing I think about, and if I had my druthers, I wouldn't think about it at all. Often I'll ask a friend or family member to grab a camera so we can get this obligatory chore out of the way.

Personally, I consider the chore of producing an author photo for every new book to be a royal pain in the posterior.

I'm sure readers have noticed how beginning in the early-to-mid-1970s, around the time *People* magazine first appeared, a great many pictures of writers became "glamour photos." Or what I'd call vanity photos. Sometimes when you went to hear an author read at a bookstore you were in for a mild shock---he or she didn't look like that photo on the book jacket at all. (See my cartoon on this by going to my author's website at www.oxherdingtale.com and clicking on the portfolio for "Cartoons, 1970 to 2004.) One famous author, who I will not name, used the same author's photo for what seemed like twenty or thirty years. And don't get me started on the number of male writers who pose wearing leather jackets. (Yeah, I did one of those, too, for my second

novel when I was in my early 30s, and my agent Anne Borchardt classified it as my "angry, young man photo." But, hey, I was buff and "cut" back then from choy li fut kung-fu and weight-lifting.)

The Buddhist in me can't help but feel sometimes that the use of a vanity/glamour photo is silly and reduces the text to the status of being no more than a trinket or ornament for the writer's ego. (Especially if the text turns out to be abysmal.)Strange as this may sound to say, I just want to see the baby---the book or artwork---more than I do the mid-wife who delivered it. When he passes on to his just reward, that's all we're going to have to work with anyway---the book, and that's only if it embodies the kind of excellence required for it to endure.

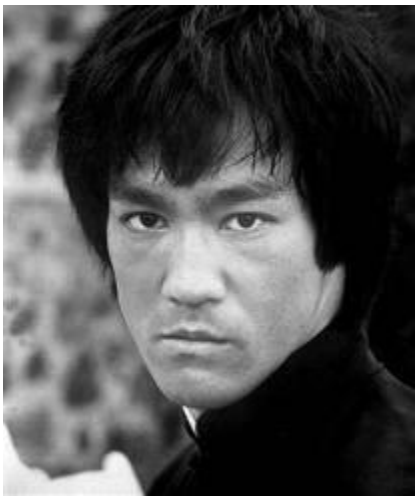
For me, when I read an author's work, his (or her) photo is just a minor distraction, and it might prejudice my experience of the text. I'm interested in the quality of his (or her) mind and their literary skill, not the quality of work by their hair stylist, dermatologist, plastic surgeon, make-up artist, tailor or clothier, or the skill the photographer has with lighting and various lenses. *I.e.*, with creating an illusion. In other words, I couldn't give a rat's rear-end about what they look like.

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at 1:08 AM
http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/06/image-known-as-charles-johnson.html

Monday, June 20, 2011

CHARLES JOHNSON TALKS ABOUT BRUCE LEE

Cartoonist Shary Flenniken, a former *National Lampoon* editor (her well-drawn feature "Trots and Bonny" appeared on those pages from 1972 to 1990), published in 1994 a hilarious, 112-page book entitled *Seattle Laughs: Comic Stories about Seattle* (Homestead Book Company). It contains the work of 38 cartoonists. My very humble contribution is a two-page comic strip called "A Dragon's Tale."



Set in Lake View Cemetery, where martial artist Bruce Lee is buried, the story presents in 13 panels a young karate student at Lee's grave site. He seeks inspiration for his own practice as he relates for the reader Lee's history from his early days in Seattle when he bused and waited tables at Ruby Chow's restaurant, was for 3 years a student at the University of Washington (he was a philosophy major), where he met his wife, to his Hollywood career and early, sudden death. All that happened years before I moved to the Pacific Northwest. It took me weeks to draw, ink and letter those two pages on Lee's life, and I gained enormous appreciation for the great comic book artists---the Jack Kirbys, Denys Cowans and John Romita Jrs---who produce hundreds of pages of art like this every year.

Like most teenagers in the 1960s, I was introduced to Bruce Lee, a student of Wing Chun grandmaster Yip Man for two years starting when he was 13-years-old, through his role as Kato in the dreadful "The Green Hornet" series. At the time what he did on screen looked impossible---just like the spontaneous, inside crescent kick he did in his screen test for that role *as* he's talking to the camera looked incredibly fast. He was the only thing worth watching in that show. In Alex Ben Block's quickie book, *The Legend of Bruce Lee* (Dell Publishing Co, 1974), Lee---who struggled against Hollywood's racist attitude toward Chinese and Japanese actors---is quoted as saying, "You know why I got the 'Green Hornet' job? Because the hero's name was Brit Reed and I was the only Chinese guy in all of California who could pronounce Brit Reed, that's why." One assumes from this that other Chinese actors who auditioned perhaps pronounced the name as B*l*it *L*eed.

Naturally, I admired Lee as the non-white martial artist who, after repeated rejection in Hollywood (he really wanted the lead role in the "Kung Fu" series that starred non-Chinese actor David Carradine), found he had to leave this country in order to get a break in his career. In 1970, he began starring in films for Shaw Brothers of Hong Kong. Those made him a pop cultural icon in the East. By the time he returned to Hollywood to do "Enter the Dragon," he was earning $1 million per movie and had single-handedly started a genre of American martial arts "action movies" (as he liked to call when he did) that created careers for numerous other practitioners of Asian martial arts in the 1970s and '80s.

Equally interesting, though, is the fact that Lee, a martial arts fanatic, created his own fighting system, Jeet Kune Do ("The Way of the Intercepting Fist"), which combines techniques from several martial art systems---he saw it as graduate school for those who already had black belts, and after his death this system was taught by his friend Dan Inosanto, a master of Escrima, or Filipino stick fighting.

Here in Seattle, just before I went to San Francisco and started training in Choy Li Fut kung-fu in 1981, I briefly studied "modern Wing Chun" with John Beale, a student of James W. DeMile, who was one of Lee's original students when he arrived in the northwest. Sifu DeMile was the first person to teach me how to meditate in the early '80s. Wing Chun is a system known for its close-in fighting techniques, and Lee once said he studied it with Yip Man because (1) He was in a gang after his career as a child actor in 20 Hong Kong films starting when he was 6-years-old (he came from an acting family) and he needed to know how to fight; and (2) Because he was near-sighted and wore glasses, so close-in fighting suited him well if his glasses got knocked off, which always happens in a fight or sparring situation. (That is the only reason I started wearing soft contact lenses in the '80s, *i.e.*, for martial arts class.)The workouts at that Seattle school, where Sifu Beale was the instructor, were intense, rewarding, and memorable. So, yes, there are things I admire about Bruce Lee. Why else would I work for weeks on a 2-page comic strip about him?

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at 1:26 PM
http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/06/charles-johnson-talks-about-bruce-lee.html

Wednesday, June 22, 2011

Charles Johnson on W.E.B. DuBois

“One ever feels his twoness---an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body.” W.E.B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folks.*

For most of the afternoon I've been searching in vain for a copy of my 1993 *New York Times* book review of *Lure and Loathing: Essays on Race, Identity and the Ambivalence of Assimilation*, edited by Gerald Early. This is a heuristic starting point for any discussion of whether DuBois's more than one hundred year old description of black American being still has relevance. In it twenty black American writers and scholars examine DuBois's formula. The contributors include Molefi Kete Asante, Toni Cade Bambara, Stephen L. Carter, Wanda Coleman, Stanley Crouch, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Nikki Giovanni, Darlene Clark Hine, Kristin Hunter Lattany, C. Eric Lincoln, Glenn C. Loury, Reginald McKnight, James McPherson, Kenneth R. Manning, Ella Pearson Mitchell, Wilson J. Moses, Itabari Njeri, Alton B. Pollard III, Robert Staples, and Anthony Walton.

A century after Dr. DuBois published his trenchant (for the times) and often quoted definition of black being, I find that today one element most in need of revision is that which speaks of "two unreconciled strivings" insofar as the first black American president is presently campaigning for his second term.

Before Barack Obama's election, the world held its breath at the unprecedented possibility of a black man taking up residency in the White House. On the day of his inauguration, celebrations were held all over this planet. A watershed moment in world history unfolded before our eyes. But just two or three months into his first term a reporter asked him about the nearly magical spell caused when he, his wife and children became the First Family. Obama's reply was telling and important: "That lasted about a day."

One day, I believe, is all that the celebration of the first black president deserved, especially in Obama's case, for this country was struggling (and is still struggling) with its greatest financial meltdown since the Great Depression. No one much cared by March, 2009 if President Obama listened to Lil Wayne on his I-Pod or if the White House chef put soul food on the menu or if he was reading black authors before going to bed at night. What citizens wanted to know was how the president they elected to serve all the people would save their jobs and save their homes from foreclosure---indeed, how he would salvage the crippled American economy. To borrow a phrase from Herbert Marcuse (and to leave the critique that comes with it off to one side), what is operative here is---not DuBois's 1903 description---but the Performance Principle, and in much the way we judge athletes, *i.e.*, not by how much melanin they possess, but their performance on the playing field.

Today, then, the concern of most Americans who are not bigoted or brain-dead is less with whether you are black, a Muslim, a woman, or gay, as with what you can *do.* At this moment I'm reminded of the phrase *esse est operari*, or "To be is to act." That phrase has received much interpretation from theologians and students of process philosopher Alfred North

Whitehead. But at this moment, and in the context of this discussion of Du Bois's century-old definition, as well as the "global, knowledge-based economy" we presently find ourselves within, I will venture to say that at the dawn of the 21st century and a new millennium, what we call "identity" is (or should be) overwhelmingly defined by our individual actions and deeds. As Sartre suggested when he wrote, "Existence precedes essence," we---each and every one of us---are creating our "essence" or being (the meaning of our lives) every day, moment by moment, through what we do and don't do. The meaning of what and who we are is not pre-given. Being a Buddhist, I have no empirical evidence to support a belief in DuBois's "two souls." In terms of a conventional approach to talking about either "identity" or the "self," I feel both are best seen as a process, not a product. A verb, not a noun.

For these reasons, I would happily in 2011 retire DuBois's segregation-era description (along with its sensational imagery of inner warfare) and replace it with something a bit more dynamic such as *esse est operari.*

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at 4:21 AM
http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/06/charles-johnson-on-web-dubois.html

Sunday, June 26, 2011

HOW WE SOUND

E. Ethelbert Miller asks, "What challenges have African American writers faced when attempting to use Negro Dialect or Black English in their work? Is there an "authentic" black voice? How do black people talk? Is it difficult to convey the full texture of our language on the page?"

I thought I would take a stab at this question because in October I've agreed to read a new story (on income inequality) for Richard Hugo House in Seattle, and teach a three-hour workshop on narrative voice or ventriloquism. Voice can be an elusive dimension in fiction, but it is an element of craft I've devoted myself to exploring since 1972. In his recent essay on "Popper's Disease," writer Tom Williams also touches upon other stories in that collection, *The Sorcerer's Apprentice*, and describes the tale "Exchange Value" as "a story in dialect...that rivals Hurston and Twain."

Obviously, the "dialect" Williams refers to in that story is nothing like the Negro dialect we associate with, say, the work of Paul Laurence Dunbar. Nor does it resemble the caricatured form of black speech we see in the Plantation school writers or, for that matter, in Mark Twain's black characters. In those cases, you will notice, all the black characters speak the same way in a kind of generic, butchered English that fails to individuate one black speaker from another. This is simply the wrong way---the lazy way---to put speech in the mouths of black characters, because like all human beings every black person speaks differently. Consider this observation by philosopher R. G. Collingwood:

"Speech is after all only a system of gestures, having the peculiarity that each gesture produces a characteristic sound, so that it can be perceived through the ear as well as through the eye. Listening to a speaker instead of looking at him tends to make us think of speech as essentially a system of sounds; but it is not; essentially it is a system of gestures made with the lungs and larynx, and the cavities of the mouth and nose. We get still farther away from the fundamental facts about speech when we think of it as something that can be written and read, forgetting that what writing, in our clumsy notations, can represent is only a small part of the spoken sound, where pitch and stress, tempo and rhythm, are almost entirely ignored. But even a writer or reader, unless the words are to fall flat or meaningless, must speak them soundlessly to himself. The written or printed book is only a series of hints, as elliptical as the neumes of Byzantine music, from which the reader thus works out for himself the speech-gestures which alone have the gift of expression."

As an exercise, think of how you might portray different cadences, intonations, accents, tempo, inflections, and speech-sound qualities in dialogue for Barack Obama, Fifty Cent, Rev. Jeremy Wright, Louis Armstrong, Billie Holiday or Ethel Waters. Is it possible to have something of their unique sound "cling" to the words we place on the page for them to speak? In other words, to *not* ignore, as Collingwood puts it, "pitch and stress, tempo and rhythm"? Personally, right now and whenever I think of the next story I wish to write, whether in first or third person,

regardless of whether it is set in the past or the present, I'm intrigued by the idea of creating a character who primarily speaks in periodic sentences---like this one you just read.

When I wrote "Exchange Value" with the story in the voice of the character Cooter, my aim was to see if a philosophical fiction, one about our experience of money, could be the vehicle for a voice entirely rendered in contemporary (at the time, the late '70s) black slang. That language is 180-degrees different from the first-person narrator of "Popper's Disease," who is a physician acquainted with many sciences; and it differs yet again from the third-person narrative voice of the title story for the collection, which is the voice of the traditional folk-tale or fairy-tale storyteller. The first observation to make, then, is that there are potentially as many black narrative voices as there are black people---voices flavored with a West Indian patois, or ones that are black and British. None is more "authentic" than any other. Compare the voices of Frederick Douglass, Rev. Richard Allen, Phyllis Wheatley, and the character Tiberius in the *Soulcatcher and Other Stories* collection. Each differs in diction based on their background, education, and the way each individually tailors language to his or her vision of the world. The ideal in a work of fiction would be for the dialogue for each character to be so unique and specific to him or her that we could dispense altogether with the tags "he said," or "she said," just as we don't need them to recognize people we know speaking around us in a room. For an example, see my story "Poetry and Politics," which is all dialogue without a single line of description or narration.

The second observation to make is that achieving narrative ventriloquism requires that (1) a writer must have an ear sensitive to the rich variety of black (and white and other) voices around him; (2) he or she must carefully weigh each possible word choice so that the voice is consistent; and (3) the writer, like an actor, must enjoy playing a role or putting on a mask for the duration of the story.

Ideally, a line by a first person narrator in, for example, *Middle Passage* cannot be lifted from the text and simply dropped into *Dreamer*. In the former novel, Rutherford Calhoun's speech is textured by the language of sailors and the sea---I read an academic study of Cockney slang (and all of Melville's sea stories) in order to occasionally sculpt his sentences (word choice, syntax, rhythm) and those of the sailors with language appropriate for their Life-world and lived, daily experience. (One of the delights of doing that was discovering just how much of the language of sailors and the sea is a part of our ordinary daily discourse, and the fresh possibilities for creating metaphors that it allows.) Now, contrast *that* language to the third-person narration in *Dreamer*, which is saturated with two millennia of theological words and concepts appropriate for the Christian vision and voice of Martin Luther King Jr. Then contrast the voice in both of those books to that of the first-person slave narrator, Andrew Hawkins, in *Oxherding Tale*, where his language now and then is a mock version of narrators in the early English novel and, in one instance, the one we find in Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shanty*. A *world* is invoked by each word the narrators use in those novels and, therefore, their voices are not in any way interchangeable when those narrative voices are at their purest.

We see how this works most clearly with first-person narrators because there each line of narration is also a revelation of the individual character---it is *both* narration and a character line; the narration could, in fact, be a monologue (or testimony) by a character. (See my story "Confession," which is a monologue in which only Tiberius speaks until the end of the story.)

However, the presence of voice---a *personality* infusing the narrative---should also be recognizable in third-person narratives where the narrator is *not* a character in the story. This can happen in two ways. First, if the story is third-person-limited to one character (usually the protagonist), the narration can occasionally employ the individuated speech of that person, *i.e.*, when he perceives something or makes a judgment, the narrator uses his idiosyncratic diction as happens in the story "The Education of Mingo." The second way of approaching a third-person narrator who is outside the story (like God would be if he was narrating a tale) occurs, for example, in one contemporary fiction I recall, where the narrator employs full omniscience by first physically describing a character for us, then saying, "Now let's go across town to her bank and see what's inside her safety deposit box." There, the narrator---although not a performer in the story----becomes as much of a "character" through his voice as someone in the *dramatis personae.* He can stand back from them, comment on and judge them as the narrative unfolds, and in the hands of a skillful writer this can be highly enjoyable. (Yet another approach for third-person full omniscience, one that attempts to achieve the neutral illusion of the "objective" camera's eye, is one where the writer scrubs clean all personality from the narration, but we see that in this case objectivity is an illusion because *where* one places the supposedly unbiased camera is already a decision and a judgment and a choice saturated with subjectivity.)

Let me conclude this post on voice by saying that every fiction is experienced as a "whole." In order to discuss different aspect of a story, we only isolate them for the purpose of pedagogy. But it should be clear that any analysis of voice inevitably segues into a discussion of viewpoint, and that---like pulling a thread of a sweater---leads one to an examination of the character that particular viewpoint represents.

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at 7:29 AM
http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/06/how-we-sound.html

Monday, June 27, 2011

TEACHING IN BLACK AND WHITE

During the summer of 1989, I taught a week-long fiction-writing workshop at Indiana University. When the students (all white) and I met during a Sunday evening set aside for orientation, I explained what I expected them to do over the next five days---the relentless writing and rewriting, the challenging exercises on craft, and the lectures I would daily give on various aspects of literary technique. When I was done, one student said, "Wow, you teach a really high-powered class."

And so it went for three days of delightful, total immersion in the craft of literary fiction. Then, at the end of the third class, one student raised his hand and said he wanted to ask a question for himself and a few other people taking the workshop. I was fully anticipating---and girding myself for---a question about contemporary and ancestral literary forms, about the different ways to approach viewpoint, or the intricacies of plotting, or characterization or some other matter we'd been so absorbed with for days. Instead, he said:

> "We've never had a black teacher before. Can we talk about race?"

I know they all could tell from the expression on my face, and my silence, that I was stunned and, for a moment, disoriented. Race? I thought. This is a workshop on *applied aesthetics*. Their request blind-sided me completely. I hadn't given *their* "race" more than a passing thought. My concern had only been to professionally deliver a body of knowledge that was non-racial. Slowly, I said, "Sure. But since we only have two more days left, let's not take up class time with this. We can meet for dinner tonight, if you like, and you can ask me all your questions."

I went back to the dormitory room where I was staying, deep in reflection, wondering, "What just *happened* here?" Then I met with the handful of students who could make it to dinner at a pizza parlor off campus. By that time they were reluctant to ask me questions about "race," probably after seeing my first, stunned reaction. My expression in class probably cast a chill over the whole matter. Needless to say, that dinner was a dead affair, and saddened me considerably.

This is an incident I thought about often during my 33 years as a college professor. And it is by no means an isolated one. Black colleagues of mine have similar (and far worse) war stories they can tell because we were the first generation of young, black professors right after the Civil Rights Movement to integrate in significant numbers formerly white American universities. We were the "shock troops" sent in after racial segregation ended, right after the "long hot summers" of riots in northern cities. And we *did* have to live through our own racial incidents of "shock and awe" in the late 1970s, '80s, and even into the '90s. Many of our white students (and colleagues) had never known a black person---but suddenly here one was, at the front of the room, talking about philosophy or literature or physics, and so they just *had* to use that rare opportunity to engage their professor on a matter of national (and for them, personal) interest even though it had nothing to do with the content of the course. Race *was* a matter, there in their minds, as they sat

listening to their professor lecture on prosody or Plato's Myth of the Cave. Some of them just couldn't see past it.

For a black professor at a predominantly white institution of higher education, who must teach students of all races and backgrounds equally and in a color-blind fashion, this added factor of race consciousness in either the faculty or students is, obviously, not something included in one's "job description" when one is hired. For a black American professor, there is far *more* to be dealt with than appears on that innocent job description. It is a real and sometimes psychologically draining dimension of the social world black educators must daily train themselves to negotiate with infinite amounts of grace, patience, compassion, generosity, discipline (self-control), equanimity, and humor. (Believe me, as a Buddhist, that situation made me work all the time and even harder on the *pāramitās* or "virtues" that are part of the *bodhisattva* ideal.)

Yet, for all that, my decades at the University of Washington were good, rewarding ones during which I received the generous support of my colleagues and students. I have no complaints and only praise to dispense for UW. Perhaps for the new generation of black professors at colleges and universities in the 21st century things are a little less racially rough around the edges. But one should never---*ever*---assume that the daily exigencies, trials and duties on campus (or off campus) for black American and white educators are the same.

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at 9:50 AM
http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/06/teaching-in-black-and-white.html

Thursday, June 30, 2011

TEACHING IN BLACK AND WHITE, PART II

I received some kind comments and email responses to my last post that were thought-provoking. I'm very thankful for them. And I feel I should respond a little more to what I wrote just a couple of days ago.

The courses I taught at the University of Washington ranged from black American literature to workshops on literary craft, from critical theory and aesthetics to advanced essay writing, from children's literature (once) to independent studies on a wide range of subjects (the philosophical novel in general, Eastern philosophy and the Novel, screen-writing, etc.) Students didn't need to know my past or biography (except for my professional credentials, *i.e.*, who I studied with, what I'd published on the subject of the course they were taking, and so forth); rather, what they needed to know was, say, what Ralph Ellison meant on the pages of his novel *Invisible Man* (and perhaps *his* biography as it relates to that novel, his short fiction and essays); they needed to know objective content they would be tested on (they certainly weren't being tested on *me*), and to do well enough on their exams and term papers and dissertations for me to give them the "A" grade they wanted, then later for me to be able to write for them a glowing recommendation on precisely what they had mastered in my workshops on writing craft---letters of reference they would use for graduate school or employment.

Every day that I taught for three decades, I checked my personal life outside the classroom door. I didn't bring it into the classroom because the students weren't paying their hard-earned money to hear about my personal problems or my political views. As their professor, I naturally had to listen to and be open to *their* personal problems, and to provide assistance---emotional support, when they needed that. (Outside class, in my office or elsewhere, I felt it was appropriate to share, if need be, my personal experience if that would help an individual student; I did not feel class time should be used for that since not every student would be interested in hearing it, or even need to hear it.) One old phrase that people once used for faculty is *in loco parentis*, "in the place of a parent." That's how I saw and still see a professor's job----we, the faculty, are there to serve our students as their own parents would while they are under our care in the classroom and on campus.

My own "conditioning" in the classroom during my student days was this: in undergraduate and graduate school in the late 60s and early 70s, I had professors who used their classrooms as a private stage, and who regarded their students as a captive audience for their cranky opinions, professors who made their classes as much about their egos and ego-needs as the actual content of the course. I much disliked the experiences of those classes and I promised myself that if I ever became a college professor, I would never do as they did. I always felt my writing workshops should be a labor-intensive "skill acquisition" courses, emphasizing the sequential acquisition of fiction techniques and providing the opportunity to practice them. For those who might be interested in a full description of how I taught my workshops, please read the article, "A Boot Camp for Creative Writing," which originally appeared in *The Chronicle of Higher*

Education (October 31, 2003), and was reprinted in *Writers Digest* (January 30, 2009). The link for the latter is:
Writer's Digest - A Boot Camp for Creative Writing (Uncut)

I hope some of the above clarifies a little bit and expands on that recent post.

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at 5:40 AM
http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/06/teaching-in-black-and-white-part-ii.html