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The Subjective Correlative: The Poet as Pedagogue

Michael Harper began teaching at Brown University in 1970. He moved his office only once, in forty years, to the third floor of Wilbour Hall, where he and a famous Shakespearean scholar enjoyed large offices apart from the rest of the English department, wielding their ostrakon with celebratory indifference. In a room above the department of Egyptology, Harper mentored hundreds of students and dispatched them on consequential "Quests and Expeditions" in Brown University's five libraries. When I became his student and later his research assistant, I compared notes with my classmates about their own "Q-and-E": the auxiliary homework, personalized reading lists, and archival assignments that felt worthy of Admiral Byrd's compass and beard of icicles.

My first months in Harper's tutelage included John Keats's poetry and letters; the late poems and a biography of W. H. Auden; the complete works of Adrienne Rich and Anne Sexton; Mary Barnard's translations of Sappho; a geological survey of New England; a vintage guide to stamp-collecting; William Carlos Williams' *Paterson*; Ezra Pound's *Pisan Cantos*; and Muriel Rukeyser's "Book of the Dead." Additionally, I was advised to watch three films featuring the tango, to locate the then-archival letters between Robert Lowell and Elizabeth Bishop, and to interview Peter Davison, the poetry editor of the *Atlantic Monthly*, about his friendship (and short-lived romance) with the mercurial Sylvia Plath.

In connection with these intellectual errands, I met with Harper each Friday morning at seven o'clock for three years. Trekking across campus in the lessening dark of the early morning, I attended these meetings with the devotional intention of an analysand. I had little to recommend me, but Harper took my interest in poetry seriously. Indeed, he took me more seriously than I was capable of taking myself at that interval. Early in my life, I had been schooled by Franciscan nuns who taught literature as a set of moral (and vaguely Marxist) lessons and by professors at a university's high school, where I had encountered the Nobel Laureate Saul Bellow, a brilliant conversationalist and aging playboy with limited sociological interest in his students.

In Professor Harper's workshop, all students were protected from *ad hominem* attacks but expected to answer to their aesthetic choices; he certainly did not hold his female students to a lowered standard. Perhaps,

as the father of a daughter not much older than I, he knew what it took for a young woman to make her way through the vestiges of a chauvinist world. It would be years before I knew more of Harper's own story, his journey from a Brooklyn birthplace to the suburbs of Los Angeles and from the Iowa Writers' Workshop (in the heyday of Philip Roth, Paul Engle, and Donald Justice) to the upper echelon of the Ivy League. But Harper insisted that I learn my "geography," digging up the neatened flower beds of my family's immigrant history, the lacunae in the narrative. He believed that the subtle fable of childhood—and the superscript of historical event—were on equal and related footing in the artist's psyche. For a student trying to connect the intimacy and refuge she had always found in books with the more detached perspective of literary scholarship, Harper's orientation was, in a literal way, authorizing.

Strategically, Harper held his office hours early on Fridays as a special challenge to slug-a-bed undergraduates, hung-up or hung-over in their choice of enthusiasms. While he didn't discourage us from seeking him out, he wisely imposed this speed-bump to thin the traffic of students who might have otherwise preyed upon his generosity. I discovered that many of his students were drafting books—novels, monographs, collections of poems or plays—that would launch careers. They sought Harper's advice not only on the nuances of research but also on the immaterial dimensions of the writing "process," that euphemism for the murk of imaginative labor.

Harper also counseled the homesick, the unhinged, those caught in the sniping fire of that decade's culture wars in the English, history, and African American Studies departments, steering them to counseling, a weekend trip home, a cut-through in a political maze. Budding math geniuses, classicists, and pre-medical students also took Harper's courses for their bracing challenge. He had, in turn, a deep appreciation for those mastering systems of knowledge unrelated to his bailiwick in American literature and, specifically, the midcentury American poets responsible for translating, transmuting or repudiating the legacy of modernism as they wrote for the contemporary ear. In Harper's temperament and expertise, I could not have found a better mentor.

I had arrived at Brown knowing more about Catullus's sparrow poems than I did anything after Tennyson. While I had absorbed the Joycean music of my father's working class background, my ears were drumming with Virgilian Latin and Gerard Manley Hopkins, the woe of Gawain and the warbling of Rossetti. I hadn't much exposure to poets actively shaping

our living language. Harper's syllabus, with its twenty-five American poets born after 1920, was the perfect antidote to my Anglophilia and teenage fixation on T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*, which I had the awkward habit of reciting, in the choice oracular bits, like an addled pensioner. Harper's syllabus also mandated weekly "verse exercises" in all the traditional forms: Petrarchan and Shakespearean sonnets; ballads, villanelles, and sestinas; blank verse and heroic couplets; terza rima, triolets, and ghazals. In making us play all the instruments, Harper showed us what it would take to compose our own songs or "make it new." To venture forward, one had to pedal backward, connecting the idiomatic reach poetry lends to contemporary language with the forms and modes of thought lent by the tradition.

The struggle to write a single "good" poem fueled my scholarly interests. Harper turned my energies toward unpublished materials, research grants, travel to archives, two senior theses, and monetary contests for my novella and manuscript of poems. When the larger of two award checks arrived, Harper urged me to spend it on a sojourn to Paris or a down payment on a car. (I applied, instead, to graduate school.) Continually unimpressed, Harper seemed to have his eye on things I couldn't see for myself as I juggled work-study jobs, unwieldy manuscripts, classes, and a slow recovery from back surgery. In my senior year, when I told him that I had assembled a list of journals to which I might send poems, he replied—with his beret cocked sideways over a "long look"—"What is it that makes you think you need to ask for permission?"

His remark startled me; all at once, I had graduated. "Learn to judge your efforts," he repeated, "by what's already on the library shelves." And in case I balked at that old-fashioned suggestion, he added, "You're going to waste your twenties, anyhow," a teasing phrase that never failed to get my goat or gall my determination to prove him wrong.

From this side of thirty, I know that am not alone in my debt to the third-floor resident of Wilbour Hall, the Sphinx above two floors of Egyptology. On any Friday morning, I would emerge from my audience with the professor I regarded as my academic parent, and I would find five or six students queued up to meet with him. An hour before, I had walked down a Prospect Street not yet trafficked by other students, faculty or suited administrators as I prepared for the neo-Socratic questions that soon would sail across Harper's desk, with or without a complementary banana. With the unthinking comfort of habit, I had tugged open the heavy door to Wilbour Hall and tip-toed past the doorway of the

Sanskrit scholar who kept an unblinking vigil over giant tomes. Turning up the stairs, I knew to expect a deep sigh from the third step, a view of the library from the sixth, the square-shouldered regard of a pharaoh statue on the landing, the squeak of a rickety handrail, and church-like mahogany benches in the third-floor lobby. Traveling this terrain weekly, I memorized the details, a reflex I developed as a shy child, displacing my anxious self-scrutiny onto external objects, staying my flight instinct with the concrete solidity of furniture, texture, a certain angle of light.

My shyness found a home in Harper's magnanimity. Though I was expected, Harper often appeared surprised at my punctual arrival. His office had two windows, itself a sign of election; three of his four walls had floor-to-ceiling bookcases; tall stacks of books populated the floor between his door and his L-shaped desk rather like the model of an urban skyline. There was just enough room to negotiate my knapsack in-and-around each book-tower, holding my breath slightly until I reached the chair's safe harbor.

"Here's trouble," Harper would announce as I took my spot. "Did 'Trouble' have breakfast?" If I demurred, a piece of fruit often flew across the room, a test of my early morning reflexes.

"So," Harper would begin, with a tone of challenge. "What trifling questions did you bring today?"

Oftentimes, I didn't know where to begin. Hesitating, I would scan his desk that was a bibliographer's nightmare and an archaeologist's daydream: covered, as it was, with books in every genre, unsolicited manuscripts, mail and literary journals from around the world. Harper would fill the pause with a bit of backyard literary gossip—the politics of the National Book Award Committee, a graduate student rescued from a bipolar adviser, a novelist's mid-career breakthrough, a poet poached by Princeton. At other times, he would ask gentle circumspect questions about my physical recovery from the surgery I had before starting college. When I appeared visibly stiff at the end of the term, he recommended paella at a restaurant downtown and a physical therapist on the East Side, volunteering telephone numbers for both.

But typically, after a bit of casual badinage, we got right down to business: a bracing half-hour discussion that often began with one of the twenty-five poets on Harper's syllabus. Many of the writers whose work we discussed—W. H. Auden, Christopher Isherwood, Donald Justice, Ralph Ellison, Robert Hayden, Elizabeth Bishop, and Gwendolyn Brooks—were Harper's friends or collegial rivals. Not only did his encyclopedic

mind include lengthy poems or prose passages he could quote verbatim, but also reminiscences that contextualized these writers in their neighborhoods of biographical and historical circumstance. These stories included Harper, as a student at Los Angeles State, asking Auden to recite "September, 1939" to his class, a request Auden obliged; tales of the late Larry Levis and of Lawson Inada; features from a reading tour with Denise Levertov; private conversations with Ralph Ellison; the mechanics of seeing Robert Hayden's work into publication. These anecdotes were recounted alongside Harper's "echolocations," his assessments of their work, their place in posterity's annals.

The decadently stuffed interior of Harper's university office seemed, in many ways, an externalized representation of his mind, a staging of the *psychomachia* between administrative duty and creative autonomy, responsiveness to students and the requisite solitariness of the artist. These working antinomies did not drive Harper, as they do many, into a hardening of the empathic arteries, scheduling mania or defensive paranoia about all that can thief time from the cultivation of poems. He seemed, in ways remarkable to me now, able to dwell comfortably in his life's Negative Capability.

When I teach Harper's poems, I don't let on initially that he was my "poetry professor" over a decade ago. We begin with what the Norton or another anthology offers: the seismic explosion of "American History"; the devastating elegies of "Deathwatch" and "Reuben, Reuben"; the verse portraits of John Coltrane, Charlie Parker, and Bessie Smith. Students sense, almost immediately, the presence of a vatic voice that will not, in the words of one freshman, "let them off the hook anytime soon." It's when they've analyzed these poems, trying out their new poetic vocabulary, that I give my students copies of other sequences: the tender "Discovery," Harper's first published poem and, perhaps, the best of his love poems from what the public has seen; "Kneading," "Utility Room," and "Negatives," wherein maternal desires dramatically parallel artistic making; and the syncopated brilliance of the "Frederick Douglass Cycle," which conjoins the scope of an epic with the lyric's psychological intensity.

In our second class, I introduce "Ruth's Blues," "Elvin's Blues," Harper's statements about the "subjective correlative," and excerpts from *Time Magazine's* Special Edition on "Black America" from April of 1970. And it's here that I let them in on the conversation I have had with Harper for nearly fifteen years: a dialogue that began in his course, in office hours and archival errands, and continued past the parturition of graduation in

our typed postcards and "natal day" greetings, in letters and occasional phone calls, in visits to Providence, Rhode Island, and in Providence's "visits" to me in one or two well-timed interventions. Harper's investment in his students, those he hoped would "exceed" him, takes on an almost mythic proportion when considered in aggregate, as there are scores of us who acknowledge that his teaching was the *sine qua non* of our artistic formation or professional existence.

This investment, in my mind, parallels one of Harper's principle poetic strategies, a stance he terms the "subjective correlative." Here, I gloss for students T. S. Eliot's "objective correlative," the notion that in literary artistry, the writer's personality and emotions ought to be sublimated into an impersonal set of images or descriptions, separating "the man who suffers and the mind which creates." Harper, I explain, positions himself in counterpoint to Eliot's model as "an initiate of the subjective correlative; that is, a slant affinity to modernism as practiced by the ancestors." When I asked Harper about this statement in a formal interview in 2009, he brought up two poems, "Ruth's Blues" and "Elvin's Blues" to illustrate how, in his poetics, "*one is always responsible for the speaker* [...] ut the speakers are allowed to vary." To my mind, Harper formulates the artist's relation to his subject as one of dialogic "responsibility" rather than Eliotic obliquity. If Harper intends, as I suspect he does, to connote the Latinate sense of "responsibility" as "answerable to," then he allows for a generative *agon* between the speaker and the subject, between the poet and contrived persona, between the suffering mind and the conjured "other" (man or woman) who gives voice to that subjectivity, initiating a subtle lyric dialogue that invites—rather than excludes—the imaginative possibility of response.

We turn to the poem sequence "Ruth's Blues" and to "Elvin's Blues" with the poet's formulation of his role in mind. The former features an aging Minnesotan agrarian matriarch, steeled to her own decline, living in a rural economy where children are labor, provisioning is law, and growth is a harvest of painful sublimations. The latter portrays the blues musician Elvin Jones made impotent by drugs seemingly taken as a release from the "stone ground bread" and "inarticulate madness" of an invidious white culture that construes him as their "black narcissus." In both poems, Harper suggests how social disease, racism, and restricted freedom in the public sphere incur losses in the private domain. Elvin's cocaine rush, for example, is juxtaposed with the anguished apology he offers his wife for his continued erotic failure.

Why might this imaginatively intimate relation to one's poetic material be important? I share with my students that when I asked Harper about "Elvin's Blües," he stated that he created the character knowing that "the idiom being used was not only going to be a musician's. There would be a succinctness and profanity in it. [...] To survive as an artist in America is always an endurance contest, particularly if you are black." Elvin's "voicing" speaks beyond the lineaments of character to the trifold pressures of artistry, masculinity, and race.

And this brings us, at last, to *Time Magazine's* Special Edition on "Black America" from April of 1970. The cover shows a Jacob Lawrence portrait of Jesse Jackson, and its contents include "Situation Reports" on the status of African Americans in politics, education, employment, mental health, sports, and the arts. It features Ralph Ellison's essay, "What America Would Be Like without Blacks," which explores the white fantasia of black expulsion, and an unsigned book review entitled "The Undaunted Pursuit of Fury." The latter, an omnibus review, includes assessment of poems by Amiri Baraka (then LeRoi Jones), Nikki Giovanni, June Jordan, Etheridge Knight, and Michael Harper. And it begins with this startling claim: "For a white man to read LeRoi Jones or almost any other black poet is like being held in a dark room while listening to an angry voice threaten him in a language he is not expected to appreciate or understand." These blunt analogies to violence, to the "dark room" of black poetry, and to a seemingly incomprehensible dialect are not lost on my students. But if they somehow miss the innuendos, the reviewer offers this summation: "[B]lack poetry's message is a continuing shout that too often overwhelms the senses and allows too little room for human response."

It is *Time Magazine* in 1970. It is one of the first major book reviews Michael Harper received for *Dear John, Dear Coltrane*, which was also nominated for the National Book Award. Quoting from the title poem of Harper's book, the reviewer notes: "The rhythm of the breath line, the breathing syncopation of speech and modern music—elements inherent in black poetry's relationship to the oral tradition—have been given new life and extensions in white poetry." Perceptive students ask: What essentialist differences does the reviewer attach to "black" and to "white" poetry? Why are Harper's poems not assessed on their own merit, but for the new "breath," the "life and extensions" they lend to "white poetry"? Invariably, the conversation centers on the politics of race and literary reception, the warring dicta of aesthetic tastes, the necessity of revisiting the specific site of a literary work's arrival. Canny students note the

commercial advertisements adjacent to the book review. Directly next to this chronicle of black urban "angry" poetry are advertisements for property insurance (from Proctor Homer Warren Inc.) and burglar alarms for private residences. A history book's chapter on "White Flight" is here in shorthand. If I'm lucky, the archive trumps the anthology: students see the relevance of cultural studies to literary history. Their narrative about race and art in America expands, slightly.

Before I worked with Professor Harper, I regarded authors' archives as Virginia Woolf once regarded the British Museum: as a requisite reliquary for the bones and old books of long-wintered white men. A project he assigned me in 2001 corrected my misperception. Harper asked me to assist him in compiling an anthology titled "Poor Wayfaring Stranger" after the folk song. It would feature twenty American poets born after 1930, of various styles and backgrounds, from Louise Glück and Gary Snyder to Lynda Hull and N. Scott Momaday. My task was to read the comprehensive works of each poet and select representative poems, justifying those selections in essays that he would, in turn, present in his memorandum to the publisher. Putting on my tall boots, I went to the Hay Library of Manuscripts and Special Collections and ordered all twenty poets' published collections, broadsides, manuscripts, and biographies. Three "trucks" of materials were assembled by the archivists from the closed stacks. I phoned Harper to let him know that I'd be starting on Monday morning.

"All right," he said, laconically. "What time?"

The following week I walked across the campus with Professor Harper, startled to realize that he was joining me in the archive. After we passed through the security clearances, he took a seat beside me in the reading room where the library staff was not shy in chiding us about handling decorative broadsides and autographed first editions with adequate care. In the three hours that Harper spent by my side, he signaled that I belonged in the restricted reading room, in the archive, and perhaps in the critic's chair. When we paused for lunch, he took me to meet the library director.

"Please see that my 'deputy' has everything she needs," he said to the director who looked sternly at my running sneakers. It wasn't the first time Harper had created a theater for a student to prove herself. There was, I assume now, no anthology project, no publisher waiting in the wings. I was Harper's own wayfaring stranger that semester, "cultivating the underside of [my] . . . umbrella," to echo Marianne Moore's advice to the young Elizabeth Bishop. But the scenario Harper cooked up placed

me in the hypothetical shoes of a scholarly editor. It clarified my own aesthetic leanings and vitalized my sense of the possible. Constructing a fictional circumstance to induce a new reality is, after all, the classical task of poetic imagination. For Harper, poetry lives on a visceral hinge: in the heart-beat of history and futurity, the systole-diastole rhythm of public life and private feeling, of fact and imaginative license, of circumstance and creative response. By infusing that philosophy into his pedagogy, Harper has guided decades of students toward a "subjective correlative," enabling each of us to find and to interject our own aesthetic standards. He has lent countless wayfarers their purpose and provisional destination; our debts to his "songlines" won't be reckoned for generations to come.

Michael S. Harper: Chronology

- 1938: Born March 18, 1938, at home in Brooklyn, New York, to Warren and Katherine Johnson Harper.
- 1955: Enters Los Angeles City College, a community college. Works part-time at the Terminal Annex, Post Office.
- 1959: After receiving associate's degree, enrolls in Los Angeles State College (now Cal State-Los Angeles). Majors in English, studies with Christopher Isherwood and Henri Coulette, among others
- 1960: Graduates in December from Los Angeles State.
- 1961: Enters the Writer's Workshop at the University of Iowa, where he studies with Paul Engle, Donald Justice, Philip Roth and Vance Bourjaily. Classmates include Charles Wright and Mark Strand.
- 1963: Completes thesis (titled *Blues and Laughter*), and receives M.F.A. from University of Iowa. Completes work for M.A. in English from Los Angeles State.
- 1964: Begins teaching as instructor in English, Contra Costa College, San Pablo, California.
- 1965: Marries Shirley Ann Buffington in San Francisco.
- 1966: Son, Roland, is born in San Francisco.
- 1968: Visiting Professor, Reed College, Portland, Oregon. Poet-in-Residence, Lewis and Clark College, Portland. At the suggestion of Philip Levine, enters the U.S. Poetry Prize competition. Manuscript does not win, but is retrieved from slush pile by Gwendolyn Brooks, who arranges for publication.
- 1969: Son Patrice is born in Portland, Oregon. Begins teaching at Hayward State College, California.
- 1970: *Dear John, Dear Coltrane* published. Nominated for National Book Award. Accepts teaching position at Brown University.
- 1971: *History is Your Own Heartbeat* published.
- 1972: Daughter, Rachel, is born in Boston. *Song: I Want A Witness* published. Receives National Academy of Arts and Letters Award. Black Academy of Arts and Letters Award for *History is Your Own Heartbeat*.
- 1973: *Debridement* published.
- 1975: *Nightmare Begins Responsibility* published. Reads at the Library of Congress.
- 1976: Receives Guggenheim Fellowship. Member of Bicentenary Exchange with the United Kingdom.
- 1977: *Images of Kin: New and Selected Poetry* published. Receives grant from the National Endowment of the Arts. Receives Massachusetts Council of the Arts Award. Appointed by Governor Michael Dukakis to three-year term on Massachusetts Council for Arts and the Humanities. Tour of eight countries in Africa as representative of the United States Information Service,