

*The purpose of poetry is to remind us
how difficult it is to remain one person,
for our house is open; there are no keys in the doors,
and invisible guests come in and out at will.*

Czeslaw Milosz

There are no keys in our classroom doors. Young strangers crowd in. They come from far places distances from the towering city, from the lights, from the car horns, from the mingling voices. Their homes were on small islands, in rural villages, in now abandoned communities. They enter with wondering expressions, clutching each other's hands. The teacher, that "one person"--an urban person, sophisticated, monolingual--now uncertain of herself, looks over the diverse group, knowing how much is held in reserve. They are what she perceives, and perception is always partial. One's view is from a particular location against a particular background; one sees only a profile. The "invisible guests" may be a metaphor for energies and potentialities still untapped--or, perhaps, for angers and hostilities long suppressed.

Most importantly there are the life-stories of the young strangers, perhaps some day to become a class, a learning community. A common feature of human experience, wrote Paul Ricoeur, is that it can be organized and clarified by means of story-telling. Stories unfold in time; and temporality marks every kind of narrative, even though life-stories proceed by means of projects, undertakings, not according to story lines. "Life has no meaning," says a character in Sartre's NAUSEA, "until you tell a story about it." But the story--the recounting of events in daily life, recollections of what one has been told memories of the past overlapping present projects--has to be translated into a language. "We are condemned to meaning," wrote Merleau-Ponty. More than that, we are involved in a "reflective in a reflective interrogation, meaning "a perpetual enterprise of taking our bearings on the constellations of the world" and taking the bearings of things on ourselves, being alive, awake.

This seems to me of particular importance for the present-day city teacher caught up in routines, directives, demands for accountability. (I keep wondering and am curious if teachers are wondering: accountable, accountable for what, accountable to whom? Accountable for the survival of those uprooted young ones she finds it so hard to understand? Accountable for initiating them into a world marked by too much corruption, violence, disinterest?) We pay little attention to the existential plight of the teacher in our understandable focus on the students who so seldom reveal their invisible guests.) Merleau-Ponty kept stressing the importance of reflecting on the self, of trying to recover one's actual presence, the fact of one's consciousness. Like Ricoeur, Merleau-Ponty could only view the self as appearing by means of dialogue, communication, language. Like subjectivity itself, the self is not an interiority, an internalization of some spiritual principle, to be discovered in the silence of the inner world. "To recover the fact of my consciousness" is to discover oneself in the midst of others.

Having done so, remaining in touch with one's history and one's perceived realities, one might well achieve a full attention to "a state of wide-awakeness... a plane of consciousness of highest tension originating in an attitude of full attention to life and its requirements."

Responsibility, attentiveness, acts of connection, and concern, all this undertaken in something approximating a public space--where one can appear before others and speak along with others, where one, others, where one can attend.

I think of Paulo Freire's call for conscientization, a mode of awareness giving rise to action along with others against felt obstacles to freedom and fulfillment. And that brings me back to the strangers in the classrooms and their untold stories. The teacher, hoping to break through the reserves, can hardly pose discursive questions about what it meant for their relatives or themselves to move from a country place to an unfamiliar city. Hannah Arendt, writing about the about the conditions "under which life on earth has been given to man," spoke of labor, work, and action.

Work, she said, corresponds to the unnaturalness of things. It provides an artificial world of things of things, distinctly different from all natural surroundings. How is the teacher to read t into a silent story? How is any kind of empathy conceivable? I turn to T.S. Eliot to find out how empathy comes about.

*Footfalls echo in the memory
Down the passage which we did not take
Towards the door we never opened....
Into the rose garden, My words echo
Thus, in your mind.*

Somehow it should come clear that the newcomers do not live wholly in the present. Again, their stories keep unrolling in time. What sinks somehow below the surface, what is half-recalled, may be more likely to be recovered through engagement with a poem than through an inquiry into the facts. Imagination may be activated once the individual realizes that the poem is a created world that can be opened by someone who can summon up an 'as if', the ability to look at things as if they could be otherwise. Marianne Moore, in THE MIND IS AN ENCHANTING THING, wrote

*like the glaze on a katydid wing
subdivided by sun
till the nettings are legion,
Like Gieseking playing Scarlatti.....*

Moore arranged the parts of her interpreted experience like a virtuoso playing a piece of lovely music. The mind in search of new associations in experience, feels its way, as though blind, ground. There are metaphors, each extending meanings, releasing meanings. All sorts of particulars become what they are not and yet more than they

were, making new patterns, new connections in experience, in effect new meanings. Given the arrival of newcomers, the promise of, new stories. The doors must open now to new future possibilities; the windows, stay ajar.