The Slow Fuse of the Possible

by Maxine Greene

The following was excerpted from T&W's annual "Educating the Imagination" Lecture, delivered by Maxine Greene in May, 2000.

I think most of you know about my ongoing obsessions and about how difficult it is for me to stop obsessing. Many of you also know that for a long time, in addition to what we call “doing philosophy,” I’ve been very involved with the arts. Among the things I worry about is the danger of elitism, the danger of being pulled into a kind of art-for-art’s-sake world. I’ve tried very hard to find connections between the imagination, the arts, and the continuing pursuit of social justice.

In an issue of The Nation, Herb Kohl brought together a number of educators to talk about the condition of our schools. Lisa Delpit was the first to respond to a question about arts in education and the current preoccupation with standards. She said that in Georgia, schools that aren’t doing well in reading and math are actually taking away the arts in order to spend more time on those subjects. My feeling is that if we don’t include the arts, we’re going to prevent so many kids who are talented from ever learning to express themselves. The arts may never change the world, but they may change the people who can change the world.

I want to talk about imagination in connection with the arts, in connection with learning, in connection with being alive. Emily Dickinson wrote that imagination lights the slow fuse of the possible. Without the capacity to imagine, the ability to enter alternative realities, to bring the “as if” into being, to look at things at least for a time as if they could be otherwise, we would be sentenced to perpetual literalism, to the domain of facts. Or, as Wallace Stevens might have said, we would be confined to square rooms.

Rationalists, wearing square hats,
Think, in square rooms,
Looking at the floor,
Looking at the ceiling.
They confine themselves
To right-angled triangles.
If they tried rhomboids,
Cones, waving lines, ellipses—
As for example, the ellipse of the half-moon—
Rationalists would wear sombreros.1

Stevens is one of those artists who offers marvelous images and figures of speech to communicate what such an anti-literalism might signify. In his “Man with the Blue Guitar,” the guitarist resists the people around him and does not play things as they are. But things are changed upon the blue guitar. To play the blue guitar is a metaphor for stirring listeners to imagine, to transform the ordinary into images of what might be.

~

I think imagination (and attentiveness) can be released by a variety of popular culture offerings, and sometimes (though perhaps not often enough) they do light that slow fuse. Unfortunately, certain offerings of popular culture impose someone else’s formulas upon the consciousness of audiences. I think of the conventions associated with guns and violence. I think of the inhumane, depersonalized attractions that lured the Columbine murderers or the Nazi-influenced fantasies that fascinate the so-called “skinheads.” These are just some of the many instances in which popular culture has forced itself on our capacity to look at things as if they could be otherwise.

I think we consciously have to resist the imposition of such views, such languages and modes of seeing and saying. I want to turn to one more poet for a minute, a woman named Marge Piercy, whose work is concerned not so much with accepting others’ ways of seeing and being, but with the way in which our own dreams, perhaps our own true stories,

\[\text{W} \text{i} \text{t} \text{h} \text{o} \text{u} \text{t} \text{t} \text{h} \text{e} \text{ c} \text{a} \text{p} \text{i} \text{c} \text{i} \text{t} \text{y} \to \text{t} \text{h} \text{e} \text{ i} \text{m} \text{i} \text{g} \text{i} \text{n} \text{e} \text{,} \] \text{w} \text{e} \text{ w} \text{o} \text{u} \text{l} \text{d} \text{ b} \text{e} \text{ s} \text{e} \text{n} \text{t} \text{e} \text{n} \text{c} \text{e} \text{d} \text{ t} \text{o} \text{ p} \text{e} \text{r} \text{p} \text{e} \text{t} \text{u} \text{l} \text{l} \text{t} \text{e} \text{r} \text{l} \text{i} \text{t} \text{e} \text{r} \text{i} \text{a} \text{l} \text{i} \text{s} \text{m} \text{,} \] \text{t} \text{o} \text{ t} \text{h} \text{e} \text{ d} \text{o} \text{m} \text{i} \text{i} \text{n} \text{e} \text{ o} \text{f} \text{ f} \text{a} \text{c} \text{t} \text{s}.

\[\text{c} \text{a} \text{n} \text{\ b} \text{e} \text{ \ s} \text{e} \text{c} \text{r} \text{e} \text{t} \text{e} \text{d} \text{ a} \text{\ n} \text{d} \text{ r} \text{e} \text{p} \text{e} \text{r} \text{s} \text{e}. \] \text{I} \text{n} \text{a} \text{ \ p} \text{o} \text{e} \text{m} \text{ \ c} \text{a} \text{l} \text{l} \text{e} \text{d} \text{ \ “T} \text{h} \text{e} \text{ \ P} \text{o} \text{v} \text{o} \text{c} \text{a} \text{t} \text{i} \text{o} \text{n} \text{ \ o} \text{f} \text{ \ t} \text{h} \text{e} \text{ \ D} \text{r} \text{e} \text{a} \text{m},” \text{ P} \text{i} \text{e} \text{r} \text{c} \text{y} \text{ \ w} \text{r} \text{i} \text{t} \text{e} \text{s} \text{ \ a} \text{b} \text{o} \text{u} \text{t} \text{ \ t} \text{h} \text{e} \text{ \ c} \text{o} \text{n} \text{n} \text{n} \text{e} \text{c} \text{t} \text{i} \text{o} \text{n} \text{s} \text{ \ b} \text{e} \text{t} \text{w} \text{e} \text{e} \text{n} \text{ \ d} \text{r} \text{e} \text{a} \text{m} \text{s, i} \text{d} \text{e} \text{n} \text{t} \text{i} \text{d} \text{y, e} \text{n} \text{e} \text{r} \text{g} \text{y, a} \text{n} \text{d} \text{ p} \text{e} \text{n} \text{t} \text{i} \text{a} \text{l} \text{i} \text{t} \text{y}a} \text{. A} \text{n} \text{d s} \text{h} \text{e} \text{ \ s} \text{a} \text{y}:\]

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{We are sleep-walkers, troubled by nightmare flashes.} \\
\text{In locked wards, we close our vision, renouncing.} \\
\text{We turn love loud on the radio to shut out cries in the} \\
\text{street.} \\
\text{Ours is the sleep of objects given, sold, taken, discarded,} \\
\text{a shuddering sleep whose half remembered dreams} \\
\text{are cast on the neat lawn of the domestic morning,} \\
\text{red blossoms torn by a high wind from a crab apple tree.} \\
\text{Only when we break the mirror and climb into our} \\
\text{vision,} \\
\text{only when we are the wind together streaming and} \\
\text{singing,} \\
\text{only in the dream we become with our bones for spears,} \\
\text{we are real at last and wake.}
\end{align*}
\]

Learning happens when the questions come and are cherished, when teachers and learners engage in dialogue in their true voices and in the context of their true stories. Recently I found something in John Dewey’s early works that seems to contain implications for all of this. Dewey was lamenting what he described as a lack of imagination in generating “leading ideas.” I suddenly wondered what he would say if he heard some of the debates between George W. and Gore. We are afraid of speculative ideas, Dewey said, we do an immense amount of dead, specialized work in the region of facts. We forget that such facts are only data; they are only fragmentary, uncompleted meanings, which need to be rounded into complete ideas. This work that can only be done by a free imagination full of intellectual possibilities.

Surely some of you remember Charles Dickens’s Mr. Gradgrind, who tried to silence and shame the little girl brought up in a circus with “Facts, Sissy, facts!” And I’m sure with the arts so often discouraged in the schools, with the technical made the governing force, those in authority are muttering the same destructive demand today. Dewey makes us realize how foolish it has been to identify the factual with the intellectual, and the informational with knowledge.
Of course, I’m also talking about the potency of works of art, when they can become objects of experience, not just novels like Toni Morrison’s or plays by Shakespeare or poems like Emily Dickinson’s, but all the forms of art—painting, sculpture, film, music, video art—and the startling apertures through which we’re beginning to see. I am not saying that encounters with art forms—even those in the form of active and reflective engagement (similar to what you might call reader-response, with respect to literature) or the exercise of the imagination—can make persons better; or more critically conscious; or that they can change the world. But I do ponder how to move people to question, how to awaken them, how to free them to respond, not only to the human condition, which we all share, but to the injustices and undeserved suffering and violence and violations—to respond and to endeavor to repair. Jean-Paul Sartre writes:

And if I am given this world with its injustices, it is not so I might contemplate them coldly, but that I might animate them with my indignation, that I might disclose them, and create them with their nature as injustices, as abuses to be suppressed. Thus, the writer’s universe will only reveal itself in all its depth to the examination, the admiration, and the indignation of the reader. [...] Although literature is one thing and morality quite a different one, at the heart of the aesthetic imperative we discern the moral imperative.³

Sartre speaks about works of art as gifts to those willing to attend. Works of art are acts of confidence in the freedom of human beings, and they may be how values are created.

I will turn to Elizabeth Bishop for the last word, which ought really to be a beginning:

Tomorrow, we shall have to invent, once more, the reality of this world.⁴

Bibliographical Sources


---

**Anodyne**

I love how it swells into a temple where it is held prisoner, where the god of blame resides. I love slopes & peaks, the secret paths that make me selfish. I love my crooked feet shaped by vanity & work shoes made to outlast belief. The hardness coupling milk it can’t fashion. I love the lips, salt & honeycomb on the tongue. The hair holding off rain & snow. The white moons on my fingernails. I love how everything begs blood into song & prayer inside an egg. A ghost hums through my bones like Pan’s midnight flute shaping internal laws beside a troubled river. I love this body made to weather the storm in the brain, raised out of the deep smell of fish & water hyacinth, out of rapture & the first regret. I love my big hands. I love it clear down to the soft quick motor of each breath, the liver’s ten kinds of desire & the kidney’s lust for sugar. This skin, this sac of dung & joy, this spleen floating like a compass needle inside nighttime, always divining West Africa’s dusty horizon. I love the birthmark posed like a fighting cock on my right shoulder blade. I love this body, this solo & ragtime jubilee behind the left nipple, because I know I was born to wear out at least one hundred angels.

—Yusef Komunyakaa