



March–April 2001

Bimonthly • Vol. 32, No. 4

# We Speak in Streetlights

## A Workshop in Spoken Word Poetry

by Scott Herndon & Jen Weiss

IN THE FEW SHORT YEARS SINCE I HAVE BEEN directing Youth Speaks in New York, I have seen every type of teenager develop into a poet. Now, from Brooklyn to Queens, from the housing projects of the Lower East Side to the townhouses of the Upper East Side, out of public and private schools, these poets are coming forward and speaking up. Backpacks loaded with composition books and ballpoint pens, they swap rhymes and heroic couplets after school, memorize their poems on subways and street corners, and perform them in venues around town. And this is happening on a national scale, as much in New York and the San Francisco Bay Area as it is happening in Ann Arbor, Michigan, and Taos, New Mexico.

I have worked with hundreds of teenagers in high school, but mostly as part of our after-school program. The gift of it comes every time I hear a teenager say what they mean clearly and with confidence. After two years in New York, I send teenagers into high school classrooms to pitch poetry to other teenagers. Commanding the rapt attention of their peers, diverse teens turn out in droves for our annual Teen Poetry Slam, spoken word workshops, and ongoing open mic series.

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The more teenagers I meet, the more I realize how many are writing, often in isolation, without even the sense that what they are writing is important. Many of these teens are natural performers, rhythmically moving in and out of language (freestyling); others are quiet observers of the world around them. They come in every form—as rappers, street poets, closet artists. They stay in the workshops because they find a community in one another, something they urgently need. As one student said about discovering Youth Speaks: “It was destiny. At first, I felt like a rebel because I thought that I had a harder life story than the others. But what I found out was that we all had similar experiences. I realized that I could begin to accept other people for who they were despite our differences in background. I figured if these people could hear me, then those from my background could hear me too. The response to my poetry was like a dream.”

—Jen Weiss

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Like you, we love the students we teach. All of us involved in Youth Speaks believe that the best teachers are those who teach out of their own passion. Ours is spoken word poetry. By sharing our method for teaching with you, we hope that our ideas will enrich not only other after-school writing programs, but also high school English classes across the country. Even if we can't start after-school programs everywhere, we want to bring poetry into the hands of as many teenagers as we can. Our strongest connection, we think, is through you, our community of dedicated and passionate teachers.

We believe there is a direct connection between the written and vocal word/world of a teenager. By combining the two through spoken word poetry, we are encouraging youth not only to think, but also find the clearest path possible by which to communicate. We begin with this: Whatever teenagers are saying, we want to hear it. Within a peer-workshop setting, we want to give our students the tools to justify, expand, and enrich their own process as thinkers and writers. After all, there are many poets in your classroom who may feel alienated when it comes to writing their thoughts down on paper, but can mesmerize their peers with their verbal flows. We want to reward both academically gifted writers and those alienated writers who express themselves in rap, visual art, and performance. By bringing them all together, we are supporting more than one kind of student.

If we are to teach our students poetry of any kind, we feel we must acknowledge what they bring to the table. Youth Speaks promotes an environment open to questions of identity, race, gender, sexuality, socio-economic issues, and burgeoning political awareness. Rather than treat their problems as though they don't exist, we want to embrace the complicated web of obstacles and achievements teenagers encounter as fertile ground for setting the writing process in motion. If at first a young writer begins to question herself and feels supported along the way, and then takes it to the level of performing her poetry (herself) for her peers, she comes that much closer to understanding herself in the context of others. We strive to provide a community which recognizes and works to address the concerns of what author Jabari Mahiri describes as, "students struggl[ing] with complex issues of representation as they seek out and try on different identities in their passage from youth to adulthood. Yet the systematic absence of representation or the calculated misrepresentation of youth as well as people of color often stifles their attempts to define and understand both their distinctiveness and their similarities."<sup>1</sup> The first step is making the teenagers we are working with feel like they belong to each other. As our students begin to know and trust each other, the next step is to make them feel like they belong to the world of writing. And there is no more accessible portal to this world than spoken word poetry.

## **A Brief History of Spoken Word**

Spoken word poetry consists of an interplay of various art forms. It is a modern-day form rooted in the oral traditions of African Griots, blues musicians and poets, Baptist

preachers, and storytellers. In recent decades, we find strains of it in the free-association methods of the Surrealists and in the protest songs and poems of the anti-war, feminist, and civil rights movements. We may have heard it in the 50s, 60s and 70s from the Beats, Gil Scot-Heron, and The Last Poets among others. The center of the recent bloom of spoken word is New York City's Nuyorican Poets Café, a hotbed since the mid-80s. The Nuyorican continues to host a packed Friday-night slam and is a regular venue for Youth Speaks's annual slams and open-mic events.

Spoken word today draws upon these historical influences as much as it does upon hip-hop and other music, pop culture, vernacular speech, and traditional poetry. It is a performance-oriented poetry the best of which begins with a precise and well-written poem. It is thus essential to recognize spoken word as a multi-layered art form, especially when engaging teenagers. Their natural facility for spoken word is no doubt linked to the prevalent influence of hip-hop culture—itself multi-faceted. Ask a teenager who her favorite poet is and you're likely to hear a range of answers: Ani DiFranco, Tupac Shakur, Sylvia Plath, Mos Def, Edgar Allan Poe, Maya Angelou, and Saul Williams.

At Youth Speaks we receive many requests from teachers, parents, teenagers, and writers around the country interested in setting up a program like ours. The possible ingredients include: an after-school writing workshop program, an ongoing, non-competitive youth open mic series, an annual teen poetry slam, an in-school poetry program, and myriad publishing opportunities. We recruit teenagers in high schools and at our public performance events. Once we have a handful of articulate, stage-savvy young poets, we offer stipends to them to work in the high schools spreading the word about what resources we offer. After all, if something is working for one teenager, many more will follow.

For the teacher embarking on a spoken word poetry workshop, our first piece of advice is to design a setting that allows for the widest possible acceptance of student voices and concerns. We strongly advise teachers to step out of our standard roles and try—with the students' help—to transform a typical high school classroom into a different creative space. This may entail having everyone address each other by first names, or re-titling ourselves as "mentors" instead of "teachers." We should trust—as we do in performing most difficult tasks—that sometimes the simplest, most direct changes can lead to positive results down the road.

What else is necessary to know when starting out? Here is a simple checklist :

1. *Let your workshop be student-driven.* In order to facilitate the greatest possible communication, you should try to have the discussion emerge from and revolve around the students' work. Secondly, try to dedicate at least half of each class to the performance of student work.

2. *No censorship.* Do your best to make the class feel totally free to express itself. As mentor, you should stay focused on your ultimate goals in the workshop rather than

getting anxious about the use of offensive words. Try to allow the group to become the crucial critical force in the classroom. This will take time, and it must be cultivated with careful tending. You can begin to achieve this by continually asking questions of the workshop, following up on controversial topics by asking the group to think aloud. Learn when to disappear on the sidelines, when to appear with a single comment, and when to have the workshop delve into a hot topic suggested by a student piece. This is how we can become great mentors.

3. *No grades.* There are no right or wrong answers here, only more and less interesting methods of self-expression.

4. *Find the good in the work of your students, and challenge it to be better.* Try to craft exercises that draw writers to *entrust each other* with the crucial job of improving each other's work by the most positive means possible.

5. As noted above, *the traditional classroom space must be reinvigorated.* Altering the space of the classroom so that it is structured around your students allows you to develop your students' awareness that this workshop is for them. This takes a little imagination from everyone involved, but it can and should be done.

6. *All exercises should be read aloud, by every student in the class.* Remember, spoken word poetry is a poetry of performance. The more we can stick to this rule early in the workshop, the easier the transition from writing to performing is achieved. If a student absolutely will not read an exercise, allow for the rare exception—but the next time, you (and the workshop as a whole) should encourage this student to read.

7. *Good teaching (and writing) always begins as experiment.* Who would perform an experiment in which they understood everything about what was being done, in which there was no risk or uncertainty to be taken?

8. *Great writing is a process, not just a product.* Try your best to think of the workshop as the beginning of a lifetime of writing for these students, rather than a sort of boot-camp designed to create a few brilliant poems.

9. *Have fun!* As mentors gearing up for the first class, we must be willing to grow excited and even be afraid, ready to be alert and engaged and receptive. Don't expect the world (at first). Trust that these poems will improve as the workshop community develops, and often when you least expect it. Above all, enter the classroom with an open mind.

Here are two exercises that are great for breaking the ice:

1. *Perform Your Name.* This exercise is designed to begin the process of improving performance, rather than writing, and to give your students ideas for future writing that will take advantage of the fact that their poems will be performed. Begin by reminding everyone how we use names over and over again, every day in many forms—as a way of calling, as identification. The idea is to give students the opportunity to make their names sound exactly as they would sound in the world that is most important to them,

whether that is at home, in the neighborhood, at school, etc.—with their body language being used to help add meaning to the performance. This exercise will also give you practice as a teacher—cultivating how you speak about the way words are performed.

2. *Perform a Poem in a Collaborative Setting.* Bring in a number of photocopied poems good for collaborative performance. After the students read the poems, they each choose a favorite and perform it. This is an excellent way to build bonds between your writers, especially since they are performing something that perhaps everyone has read for the first time. (Some good poems to use are Gwendolyn Brooks's "We Real Cool," e.e. cummings's "may i feel said he" (#38 in *no thanks*), Nikki Giovanni's "Ego Tripping," and Philip Levine's "They Feed They Lion.")

## Building Community

In the next few sessions, strive to improve students' writing and confidence by transforming the workshop into that rare gift: an audience, a community. Spoken word is a poetry that is always performed before an audience. It draws us together with its immediate, vocal candor. Sometimes, it expresses our shared language in a way we have never heard it, demands that we see ourselves and our community in a new light. At its best, spoken word is a poetry that bonds its audience together for a common end, whatever that may be. In these moments, the experience of hearing spoken word poetry and the vocal responses it elicits from its audience is electric—it is the experience of feeling a community formed by poetic energy, right before our eyes.

In Youth Speaks workshops, our mentors work very hard to engrain the feeling in their students that *these writers in this workshop* represent that sacred, best part of a writer's audience—a community dedicated to improving and applauding each other's work.

As all teachers know, achieving this kind of community is hard work. One very effective way to do it is to make a mock contract that you and all the students sign. The aim of this contract isn't to hold anything over anyone's head, but simply to highlight the importance of the workshop as the most important voice of criticism in the class. A sample contract might read:

As a member of this workshop, I recognize that the most effective way to improve my writing is by listening and striving to help improve the writing of the writers around me. The harder I think about improving my peers' work, the better I will be at writing and performing my own poetry. And the more positively I can express what I like and want to see changed in a poem, the better I will be at listening to criticism from my fellow writers—and accepting it—as I improve the way I say *what I want to say.*

\* \* \*

A second tool works well for more developed writers—writers who feel for one reason or another that their work

will not be understood by the workshop. In some cases, these writers can fall out of the workshop and drag the group's motivation and level of discussion down by their reluctance to add their work or their honest feedback to the conversation. In a situation like this, a radical move can help. Here, we can ask the class to consider the meaning of everything we write to exist *only* in terms of what the workshop can understand from listening to our performances—essentially, that a poem means nothing until it is brought to the workshop, read, and discussed. Of course, this is done with a sort of wink—for every writer knows that their poem *means* what they *think it means*, not what someone else thinks it means. But this is a good way to draw in reluctant writers (especially that smart, quiet writer at the edge of the circle)—and to energize the rest—in a process which depends on careful listening, tinkering, and deep revision. What this kind of thinking always does is create an atmosphere in which *everyone performs, everyone listens, and everyone comments*. Without all of these things, the poems—and the workshop—would be incomplete.

These tools offer two vital ways to make the workshop the central authority in the classroom, the primary voice responsible for critiquing and applauding. They also help students avoid what might be called “The Cult of the Misunderstood Poet”—the defensive posture almost all writers adopt to protect themselves from criticism. Since spoken word is really *about* communion with an audience, shifting responsibility to the group early can make the transition to performing poetry in front of large, unfamiliar audiences less daunting.

Here are four exercises to try:

1. *Is the Story in the Substance or in the Saying?* In this performance-based exercise, the workshop should form a circle. Everyone should pick a character, and try to tell the simplest of stories in that character's perspective—these stories need only be a few lines long. For instance, one possible story could be a subway conductor upset about a passenger who became ill on his car, another could be a mother who is laughing about how her daughter always lies about why she comes home late from school. The only requirement is to tell the story *in character*, in a different accent/voice. After the performances, discuss how *the way we say things* affects the meaning of I—sometimes, radically so. A variation is to have one student perform someone else's poem in a far different voice—from another socio-economic class, another race, or simply in a different tone. Afterwards, ask the group what this might change in the way they would perform their own poetry. This exercise works extremely well to bring some levity to a classroom that has written too much for the day, or in a class that is abnormally restless—it's a high-energy exercise that usually brings a healthy dose of laughter.

2. “Howl” for the Next Millenium. In this generational exercise, ask every student to begin a poem with whatever they think “must die” (e.g., hip-hop). The subject of the

poem can be anything but a person. Ask your students to continue writing off of this theme, making every line some manifestation of what must die or why. Let the rest of the poem explain the first line. Ask students to develop their poems by continuing to answer the question “Why must it die?” in terms of their own experience. We like this exercise because it promotes students' awareness of how they relate to the everyday worlds of mass-media culture, neighborhood problems, etc.—whatever happens to be pressing for them, at the time.

3. *Who is the Subject in This Poem?* Pair up your students. Send them outside for ten minutes. In the first five minutes, one of them should try to find an object and start writing about it in explicit detail—ideally, the most intricate, specific detail possible. The partner observes the writer at work. After five minutes, the partners switch roles and find new objects. When everybody comes back into the room, they swap descriptions and try to write poems combining the two descriptions: the one of self and the other of object. After reading these poems aloud, the discussion will hinge on what it *looks like* to write about a writer—specifically, how we can generate drama or urgency from this “view from above.”

4. *Have You Ever Experienced a Miracle, and If You Have, How Would You Know It?* Make photocopies of either a dictionary definition of a miracle, or, if you can find it, Julio Cortázar's “A Very Real Story” (from *Cronopios and Famas*). (You could also talk about the scene in Quentin Tarantino's film *Pulp Fiction* in which John Travolta and Samuel Jackson argue about what a miracle means.) After reading the definition and story, ask your students to talk about what a miracle means to them. Does a miracle always have to be good? Could there ever be a “bad miracle”? Why? Next, have your students write a poem about a miracle they may or may not have experienced, according to what they think the word *miracle* really means.

## Using Hip-hop and Rhythm

*And hopefully...hip-hop will openly accept the love I'm  
pourin in.*

*Take my positive energy and begin flourishin, movin for-  
ward and*

*become somethin beautiful*

*So thoughts like mine won't seem so unusual*

—Anthony K-Swift Scott

*If bebop was a response to the wackness of watered  
down jazz (read: swing), then hip-hop was a response to  
the wackness of watered down soul (read: disco). And,  
too, hip-hop's gritty urban birth was a reaction to the  
deferred dreams of the Civil Rights era.... In a nation  
which still has deep racial divisions, hip-hop has  
become the great cultural bridge.*

—Kevin Powell<sup>2</sup>

No cultural source influences young spoken word poets more than hip-hop. Why? Hip-hop is the predominant language of American urban youth. Hip-hop is what informs their aesthetic culture, and it is their dominant mode of expression when they first begin to write.

What, then, is hip-hop? It isn't just a musical term. Hip-hop actually refers to a group of related art forms: music (MCing, DJing) visual art (graffiti), dance (breaking), and a highly rhythmic and rhymed poetry (rap). Originating in the Bronx borough of New York in the late 70s, this cultural form spread across urban America, and now represents communities as distinct from each other as rural Florida is from suburban Michigan. Although hip-hop has grown to represent more than the urban experience, its core remains the same: hip-hop culture almost always celebrates the voices of economically and politically disenfranchised communities. As an art form, it tends to balance the need for social change with those of entertainment and unity.

For many urban teens, writing and performing in hip-hop does not offer a method for simply speaking poetically—rather, it offers a prized identification card, one which signifies a lifestyle and an attendant set of values. This identification functions as *both* an aesthetic expression and a declaration of political and social self-awareness. Hip-hop offers young writers an emblem of joy, a protection, a rallying cry in a tough world.

Because hip-hop (as well most vernacular traditions and forms of pop culture) is generally either ignored or shunned in school, your acceptance and appreciation of it will almost always signify something immense to your class. It often will determine whether your students will feel safe enough to express themselves and, later, desire to improve their writing. (A note: if you are teaching in a workshop in which some other form of musical expression predominates, try to use that form.)

Can we open our doors to this complex and significant cultural form in an environment which is challenging and empowering? Can we teach writing to teenagers on the perhaps unprecedented basis of *their own* poetic expertise? Amiri Baraka (then LeRoi Jones) once criticized the solely *aesthetic* understanding of jazz, writing “The major flaw in this approach...is that it strips the music too ingenuously of its social and cultural intent. It seeks to define jazz as an art (or a folk art) that has come out of no intelligent body of socio-critical philosophy.”<sup>73</sup> The question becomes: Can we avoid the same problem when we bring hip-hop into the classroom?

Of course, you may worry that you don't know much about hip-hop. Does this pose an obstacle to working with it in the workshop process? We don't think so; rather, we think it is a boon. When you encounter unfamiliar terrain, you must listen instead of seeking refuge in what you already know. What is needed right now is less a greater expertise in hip-hop culture than an open mind and the ability to pick out significant aspects of this extremely rhythmic and musical

method of writing, a willingness to ask for *more* of what is working in our students' poems.

This said, teachers who welcome hip-hop as a poetic technique should prepare to hear serious descriptions of life in a society riddled with serious problems. Students' poems often describe drugs, shattered homes, and sexual encounters; these are all part of everyday life for the urban teen. But the poems of a day's workshop can cover problems of gentrification, the tumble and rush of romantic love, or the unappetizing sight of a dead pigeon (as in one student piece, “Pigeon Filet”). Let's face it, teen poetry workshops must be a place to *have some fun*, too. And for us, having fun is only possible once we have carved a pedagogical space for *being surprised*.

This space depends on our being attuned to those aspects of hip-hop which can be used to teach our students effective and oftentimes explosive writing skills. In order to do this, we should understand at least two of the core features of hip-hop, elements which can be readily located in its family tree, not the canon of English poetry, but jazz and the blues. All that's required is a little effort.

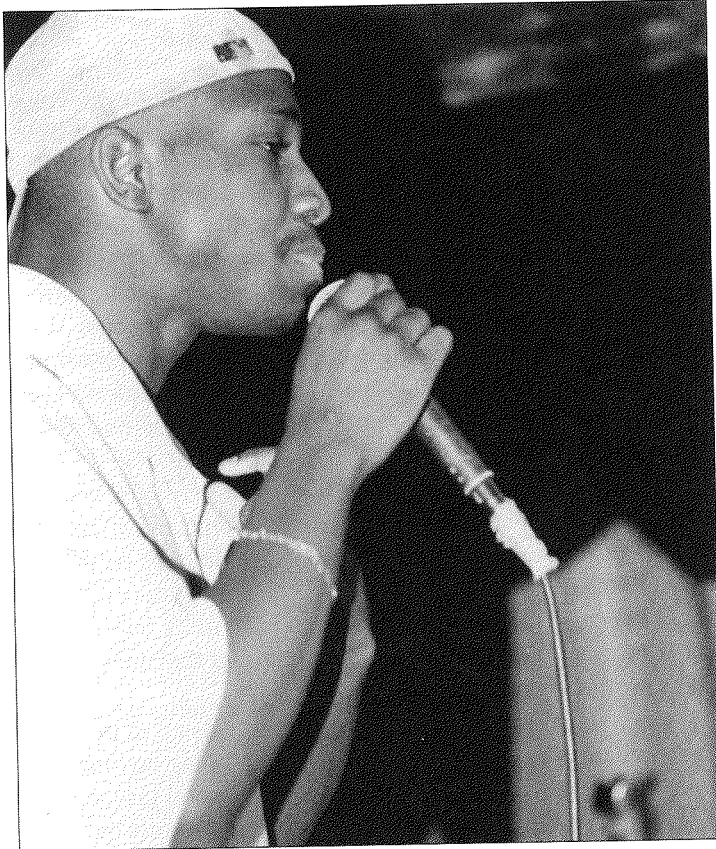
Once you demonstrate that you are interested in in what your students like, they'll be more open to going beyond what they already know. In our experience, good teachers discover possible future influences on their students by noting what their students are doing well today—and *then* offering students the outside resources that can supplement those strengths and further pique their interests in their reading, looking, or listening more widely. Spoken word writers not only love to write in syncopated verse, they love to read and perform others' syncopated verse as well. If we offer only certain rhythmically predictable verse, then, we may be failing to take advantage of the tremendous opportunity which hip-hop's overwhelmingly popular and influential voice affords—namely, our students' desire to complicate the way they are writing, which is first and foremost a writing for performance.

It is helpful to consider the experience of K-Swift (Anthony Maurice Scott, Jr.), a young poet and rapper who has attended Youth Speaks workshops since an open mic event two years ago. K-Swift first appeared as an eighteen-year-old during a summer open-mic poetry event. We were immediately struck by the sheer rhythmic and tonal sophistication of his poems. Here is his poem, “Mean Streets”:

#### Mean Streets

I live by the mean streets  
where many coldhearted teens meet  
i'm tryin' to live my life in a clean sweep  
I need sleep  
but dreams can't be reached in the hood  
kids'll rather run up in the spot and reach for the wood  
Or rather the steel  
they're hustlin' to grab a meal  
they bust shots, hop trains, stab and steal  
They buck cops, pop chains, slash and skill





Anthony "K-Swift" Scott

at bus stops, not planes, that's the deal  
 They only know quick money, no longevity  
 ain't got the ability to be strong and heavenly  
 Equipped with the wrong weaponry  
 with minds crippled like victims of leprosy  
 Thugs step to me  
 we all deal with these ghetto issues  
 I'm tired of seen my brothers dyin' behind metal missiles  
 Take my words in and let 'em hit you  
 life isn't a game, we have to get official  
 Changes must be made  
 no more death over dough  
 no more innocent children bein' left on the flo(or)  
 No more gangs with beef  
 I hope the thugs don't become angered with me  
 'cause i'm scared of living dangerously  
 I can't go to another funeral  
     due to a murder  
 committed by the regular crime with the usual burner  
 You ain't gotta stay in slums you can move further  
 But we gotta rise  
 to save a lotta lives  
 since everybody dies

Reading "Mean Streets" on the page, we need to be aware of some crucial features of the way K-Swift engaged in the writing process. The line breaks show us where he breathed or paused in his delivery. It is interesting to note that K-Swift did not subordinate the reading of his rhymes to the "look" of the line; instead, he does just the opposite: his

lines mirror his breathing patterns, according to their rhythm and music. Though his method is rigid in terms of tempo and rhythm, it amounts to a fluidity in the way his lines break on paper, and also explains why the lines do not syllabically "match up" in the way teachers might expect from an typical end-rhymed poem. When asked about his method, K-Swift said:

Rap is pure rhythm. You have the beat and you rap to the beat. You go over it and you have to keep a rhyme scheme. I usually hum a rhythm, and that becomes a rhyme scheme. I like to be as innovative as possible. I try to rhyme more and more syllables at a time. I try to rhyme entire sentences, all the while making sense.

We later asked K-Swift about his experience at that open mic event two years ago. He had wanted to perform his writing that day, he told us, but hesitated before agreeing to climb onstage. He felt he needed someone to accompany him with a rhythmic "beatbox." More than that, he insisted that if he were to perform, he needed to be introduced as a rapper—and not as a poet.

What did K-Swift's hesitation amount to? As teachers of youth poetry know, young writers like K-Swift often have a deeply negative association linked to the word *poetry*.

Once we had recognized what K-Swift's poetry potentially offered to the group, we decided to craft an entire class around the topic of rhythm. We constructed a special exercise for the students that included a personal visit from a renowned spoken word poet we had studied throughout the workshop: Tracie Morris, author of two books of poetry (*Intermission* and *Chap-T-Her Won*) and former Nuyorican Grand Slam Champion.

When Tracie arrived, we asked her to read a poem that we had listened to earlier in the workshop, "Gangsta Suite." This poem's opening lines read:

#### Who Knew?

Thought I had my shit together  
 I was feeling fly whatever  
 Feather hanging with the chickies looking dope.  
 Hoping I was doing better snapping on them foolish fel-  
 las  
 looking too hard scoping this cutie, I was like, "nope."

As Tracie read this poem in her characteristically quick tempo, she spontaneously improvised and repeated select phrases with the jarring, stutter-step effect of a hip-hop DJ spinning turntables. The effect of her spontaneous delivery was electric, and it seemed to heighten the workshop's sense that the performance of a poem takes priority over its written form.

But after she finished reading, a curious thing happened. Tracie explained to the students that in the spoken word scene there is a fundamental difference between poets who are essentially "actors" and those who are "poets." For her, the "actor" is the writer who exaggerates the import of delivery over that of the written word. The poet, she suggested, is the



*Youth Speaks poet performing*

writer who crafts his or her work so that it can remain *on the page*, and still convey its meaning(s). The poem is that which “answers for itself.”

This distinction spurred a discussion which ultimately hinged on questions of how hip-hop differs from poetry.

What did bringing Tracie Morris into the workshop do for K-Swift? When we asked him, he explained that he was struck by her combination of jazz scat, rap, and “traditionally poetic” styles. He saw some new creative possibilities. “She sort of found a middle ground,” he commented later. “She gave me ideas, in terms of performing, how I could change up my style.”

### **Nine Exercises in Rhythm & Tone**

*Note: Just as the true test of these exercises is in how the sounds are produced, their real success will derive from the diversity of rhythms and tones expressed by the group. As such, the exercises should be read aloud, by as many of the writers in the workshop as possible.*

1. *Take 5*. Everybody writes four-line rhymed stanzas based on the same theme (love, violence, hope, etc.), using their own natural rhyme schemes. Each writer passes his or her stanza to the left and continues writing, working off of the new stanza before him or her. Repeat this five times. Read the resulting poems aloud, and have the students talk about what working with other people’s rhythms was like.

2. *Terza Rima*. Students construct a series of three-line stanzas in a syllabic count of their choosing, using terza rima (in which end-rhymes occur in an *aba bcb cdc ded* sequence). Ask them if they felt confined or liberated by this. (Some, like K-Swift, will probably feel that it is easier to write within metric guidelines.) Ask the workshop how a set rhyme scheme affects the line-by-line content as well as the poem’s meaning.

3. *Changing Stations on the Radio*. Break the workshop into groups of three. Each group gets the same poem to perform as a musical group. Each group, however, represents a different kind of music: bebop jazz, hip-hop/rap, slow country western, Bob Dylan-esque (or Ani DiFranco-esque) folk, heavy metal. Within the groups, one student taps or snaps (or beatboxes) the drum beat, one hums the bass, and one performs the vocals, either by reading or singing the poem. Ask the students how the rhythm—and the music—affects the mood of the poem, and how the influence of a diversity of sounds can lead to performative advantages.

4. *Writing to a Differently Bouncing Ball*. A similar exercise to #3. Play a popular hip-hop tune and have the workshop write over the beat while they listen. Read these aloud. Then play some bebop jazz and have them do the same. Read these aloud. Then follow with a reggae song. When the music stops, ask a volunteer to read one stanza aloud while the rest of the group tries to reconstruct the beat under which the poem was written, guessing what musical selection it came from. Finally, have students pair off and work together to conjoin all three sections into one poem, arranging them in any order. Have them read these aloud. Then have them discuss how rhythmic variety can add to overall complexity of their poetry.

5. *When in Rome*. Have the workshop practice writing short poems with an unfamiliar (or non-idiomatic) syllabic formation, such as in a haiku (three lines, 5-7-5) or a tanka (five lines, varying). Urge students to rigidly adhere to the form. After reading the results, discuss what kinds of performative consequences extreme rhythmic constraints, *when read as constraints*, can create.

6. *Don’t Judge a Poem by Its Cover*. Bring in a poem and ask one student to read it aloud *as he or she sees it on the page*. Follow this with another reading by another person,

but this time have that student read it in a *radically different way*, exaggerating the line breaks and stressing inconspicuous words rather than the more obvious ones. Then have a third reader read the poem either faster or slower than the second reader. How does this change the poem's tone and meaning?

7. *The Difference Between Slam and Psalm Is One Letter.* Videotape a late-night televangelist and have the workshop watch at least a five-minute section, writing down everything they notice about his tone, hand gestures, and body language. Stop the tape and ask the workshop to consider how the tone and performance enhance and/or hinder the message. Have students write short poems using the same tone, which may or may not have anything to do with familiar televangelical content.

8. *Welcome to the Jingle.* Videotape three advertisements on daytime local television. Have students note the tonal qualities of each and then write poems—on any topic—using the tone and rhythm of their favorite of the three ads. Ask them how writing in that tone (or rhythm) determined the content of what they wrote.

9. *Marking Rhythm for New Meaning.* Take the first eight lines of one of your student's poems and transcribe them on the blackboard (or an easel). Have that student read the poem aloud, and ask the workshop to underline which words are stressed. Next, have the workshop arbitrarily pick certain words to stress and add certain pauses in places where the author would never break a line or have a caesura. Have the author read the poem and ask the workshop if (and how) the meaning of the poem has changed. (Also, be sure to ask the author how he or she feels about the process, and whether or not he or she—and the class—likes the first or second version better.)

### **The Final Week and the Process of Revision**

As the students work to push their poems as far as they can go in the closing stages of the workshop, be sure the group is careful to focus on constructive criticism. Anyone who works with writers knows that nothing sinks deeper than a purely negative comment. To counter this, we recommend beginning the last session by discussing the positive aspects of all the poems. More than anything, we are trying to bolster confidence before the Slam. This is a pivotal moment in the workshop—a moment when students feel vulnerable. Their first real attempts at polished works are coming to fruition. To ease the tension, we suggest (again) using the lexicon of opportunity. Instead of feeling like they are visiting the firing line as the first victims of the editorial police, we want our writers to feel that this is an opportunity crucial to gaining the confidence necessary to perform before peers who have not been actively involved in the workshop. The message is this: If the author knows what the workshop (and its teacher) really thinks about a given poem, he or she will have a sense of how the audience will react to it. In fact, given how much the workshop works on refining technique, it is likely that the audience will enjoy these poems even

more than the workshop itself. This knowledge can do much to alleviate the tension that can paralyze all speakers before performance.

At this point in the workshop, then, we want the group to find moments in each other's poems that may need to be written more effectively for performance. These may be moments that jar the audience, that break its concentration and enjoyment of the poem itself. After we have found these, we should follow up with another question: Is this jarring a good thing—does it enhance the audience's experience of the poem? If not, the workshop must strive to find positive criticism that will make changing the poem possible—either by rewriting it, or in absolutely the last instance, by cutting.

Here are four exercises for the final week that focus on performance and revision:

1. *Find the Hole in the Dream.* Great poems are often likened to dreams—we suspend our disbelief and simply enjoy the ride offered to us by the poet. At this late stage in the workshop, our job is to find moments in our pieces when the dream is broken. For this exercise, have students bring in three copies of a poem. After breaking the workshop into groups of four, have everyone read one poem at the same time. The goal is to find the specific passage(s) where the dream is broken (i.e., where we, as audience members, may momentarily lose interest). Have them mark these with a highlighter. After everybody else has read the piece, the author will perform the poem for the small group, and our critics will have the choice of shifting the markings of the highlighted passage, or leaving them the same. Much discussion usually follows.

2. *A Font by Any Other Name.* This exercise makes students consider the way typefaces (and by extension, speaking styles) can affect the meaning of a poem. Ask your students to bring in one poem, printed four times in four very different fonts, of radically different sizes and moods. Have students exchange their poems, read them, and decide on the fonts they like most and least given the subject matter and flow. How could the different versions, given their tones (and fonts), be effectively rewritten? Have them add, revise, and cut until the poems feel more satisfying. Afterwards, the original authors look over the “perfect” poem and the revised poem side by side. A second, related exercise would be having your students read the various fonts in different voices and tones, according to the way the words look on the page.

### **How to Set Up Your Public Spoken Word Poetry Event**

*With Youth Speaks's help, my writing and performance abilities have strengthened, and so has my self-confidence. Now I am a confident performer and I am able to share my words with an audience, without the ordeal of shaky legs and a palpitating heart. After walking off the stage for the first time I knew that I would be back again and again and again. The rush that I*



*feel from a performance is what skydivers look for or think they have found.*

—Eliza K. Schrader

*I am not a coward anymore  
I see us for what we are  
nothing less than great, because  
we are the poets...*

*we walk and talk mountains  
breathe hurricanes, hum earthquakes  
and our kisses are wet haikus glistening on crimson pages*

—from “A Poem for Us” by Tim Arevalo<sup>4</sup>

When you begin to notice that the shyest students raise their hands to read their poems in class or that the tattered pages of their writing notebooks are filling up with words, it's time to celebrate! A spoken word poetry event is a special, extraordinary school event. It is simultaneously a celebration and a site for growth and development. These events are the high point of our model of teaching; they represent that moment when the classroom is left behind, and the hard work of writing is replaced by the thrill of performing before one's peers *in one's own language*. And for a young poet performing a poem to peers for the first time, there is no experience more nerve-wracking, adrenaline pumping, or rewarding.

In addition to its educational usefulness, the performance has profound personal advantages as well. Through the act of introducing these teen poets to each other and the outside world, poetry becomes a home for experimentation and self-exposure. The tradition of it is oral. Teenagers have so few places in which to congregate and “be real” with each other. These events, if successful, become a site for youth community at its most enlightened. Adults and youth alike need to hear poetry to appreciate it. As young writers learn to love the sound of their own voices, think how much easier it will be for them to love the sounds of other voices—other poets, other teachers, other people. After the initial fear subsides, teen poets clamor to get to a mic. They begin to write more often, and for others.

A central question is which type of public event to give your workshop. Slam or open mic? First of all, you will need to decide which type of event the workshop is ready for. A poetry slam is a competition in which poets are given scores based equally on their performances and the writing. If your students are needy or hesitant with their writing, and are not confident enough to compete, it's safer to run an open mic (and usually as fun). But with exceedingly confident students, there's less reason not to run a fun (non-stressful) competition for bragging rights.

Should students memorize their poems or not? If they've had a chance to practice it, this is the time for them to try their hands at it. If they forget some lines here and there, no worries; have them keep copies of their poems in their pockets. They might also try freestyling (improvising the poem on the spot). This experiment will only enhance their perfor-

mance skills and prepare them for an open mic in future performances.

Whether it's a slam or an open mic, you will need to find an emcee (host) and a DJ. The emcee needs to be someone other than a teacher—perhaps a student—who can be sensitive and encouraging to everyone who steps up to the mic. The emcee's responsibilities are elaborated below. At Youth Speaks we have begun to let the teen poets themselves emcee the open mic events in the belief that enabling teens to do and speak for themselves is a key to them feeding the community of poets out of which they come.

A DJ is needed to create the right ambience. Youth culture thrives on music, for energy, juice, and celebration. If there's a student DJ, ask that student ahead of time to provide music for the event. Make sure there's an outlet for a sound system, or at least a stereo (or boombox). Music should be playing at the beginning of the event, when students are being ushered to their seats. The DJ can also play music before each poet goes onstage, or after his or her name is announced by the emcee. Of course, when the poet is performing, the room should be silent and the audience respectful—it is also the job of the emcee to ensure this happens.

If you've decided on a slam, you will need three or five non-partial judges and a scorekeeper. The judges should not be students—if only at first. Each judge rates a poem between 1 and 10: 5 points for performance and 5 for the writing. Whether or not you decide to have the scores read aloud after each performance or kept to the very end, the judge should write the score on a sheet of paper. The scorekeeper is responsible for recording the scores as they are read aloud by the emcee. The total score for each poet is calculated by dropping the high and low scores (from a total of five scores) and adding the middle three. For example, if a poet receives a 7.5, an 8.3, a 9.1, a 9.3, and a 9.5, the total score for that poet would be 26.7 ( $8.3 + 9.1 + 9.3 = 26.7$ ). If you decide to have the emcee or scorekeeper announce the scores, go from low to high. The judges should not take their job here *too* seriously. No scores lower than 6. The key is to encourage the poets by applauding the poetry, *not* the scores!

The emcee's basic responsibilities include not only calling up the poets and keeping the event moving, but most importantly generating love and applause from the crowd after each poet performs. A good emcee can take up blank space and fill it in, reduce the competitive juices, keep the audience excited and positive, raise the level of cheering for a vulnerable poem, elicit more applause from the audience, and evenly dole out the compliments to each poet—whether good or great. Try and find someone other than yourself or another teacher to host.

As coordinator of the event, your mind should be on the details. Thankfully, you can take care of most of these ahead of time. You need to be prepared to give a short introduction, reminding the audience to be respectful to the poets. You need to introduce the emcee. You will want to be present enough to enjoy and congratulate each of your students as



Setting up the event

well as soak up some of the striking moments to discuss the next day in class. After all your hard work, teacher, it is finally your turn to see your students in a new light. Sit back, enjoy, and revel in the poetry you hear. This is only the beginning.

### A Checklist of Logistics and Last-Minute Thoughts

1. Decide what kind of event it will be: slam or open mic.
2. Set the date, time, and place plenty of time beforehand. Each poet has no more than five minutes. Decide how much time the event will take, based on the number of poets. An hour is sufficient for most full-sized classes (30 students).
3. Performance should be mandatory for every student.
4. Involve your students in the planning and promotion of the event.
5. Let the students create the event materials and pass them out. Create an image for a flyer/poster to display around your school. Make sure it includes all pertinent information.
6. Do you need a stage, a microphone, or other AV equipment?
7. Pick your emcee. Does he or she know the routine ahead of time?
8. Transform the space. How's the seating? Enough chairs? Are the lights too bright? Is the space quiet enough for poetry? Is there time to create some artwork (a mural) to hang behind the stage?
9. Start an attendance list. Can students invite friends in other classes, or parents? If so, how many? (Parents are not often on the top of the list.) Decide whether to allow students from other classes to perform, too.
10. Ambience. Is there a resident DJ who can play music for the event, before and between the poems? Or can you pay a local DJ to spin (\$50, depending)? Do you have specific music requirements?
11. Decide how each poet will be called up to the mic. Is there an order? Should one be waiting "on deck" to prevent lag time? Will the host be drawing names out of a hat?
12. Decide on any rules or guidelines. No offensive language? Can they use a beatbox while they're performing? Can they perform in groups?
13. Recruit your judges and scorekeeper. Do they have all the supplies they need—pads of paper, pens or markers, a calculator, water?
14. Is someone going to announce the scores after each poet performs, or will just the top scorer be announced at the end?
15. Consider your introduction carefully. Introductions can cover how a slam or open mic works, what the rules are, and how the audience should act. First and foremost, the event is a recognition of the poets' hard work and courage. The audience is there to enjoy these poets' voices and give them support—so encourage everyone to show as much love as possible.

### Notes

1. Mahiri, Jabari. *Shooting for Excellence: African American and Youth Culture in New Century Schools* (Urbana, Ill.: NCTE, 1998), p. 55.
2. Powell, Kevin. *Hip-Hop: A Cultural Expression* (CSU Conference, Cleveland, Ohio, September 1999), p. 33.
3. Baraka, Amiri (LeRoi Jones). *Blues People: Negro Music in White America* (New York: Morrow-Quill, 1963).
4. From *Revolutionary Voices* (Los Angeles: Alyson Books, 2000), p. 125.

# ALL HUMAN THINGS

BY JOHN DRYDEN

ALL 	HUMAN 	THINGS 	ARE 
SUBJECT 	TO DECAY, 	AND WHEN 	FATE 
SUMMONS; 	MONARCHS 	MUST 	OBEY. 

END

—Dave Morice

# An Interview with Robert Creeley

by Daniel Kane

## From "Histoire de Florida"

What was resistance.  
How come to this.  
Wasn't body's package  
obvious limit,

could fly,  
could I settle,  
could I even  
be I...

And for what want,  
watching man die  
on tv in Holland, wife  
sitting by.

She said, "He's  
going off alone  
for the first time  
in our lives."

He told her,  
"to the stars, to the  
Milky Way,"  
relaxed, and was gone.

What is Florida  
to me or me  
to Florida except  
so defined.

•

You've left a lot out  
Being in doubt  
you left  
it out

Your mother  
Aunt Bernice  
in Nokomis  
to the west

and south (?)  
in trailer park  
Dead now for years  
as one says

You've left  
them out  
David  
your son

Your friend  
John  
You've left  
them out

You thought  
you were writing  
about  
what you felt

You've left it out  
Your love  
your life  
your home

your wife  
You've  
left her  
out

No one is one  
No one's alone  
No world's that small  
No life

You left it out

—Robert Creeley

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ROBERT CREELEY has been a major figure on the American poetry scene for decades. His recent books include *Day Book of a Virtual Poet* (Spuyten Duyvil) and *Life & Death* (New Directions). He is a professor at the University of Buffalo. DANIEL KANE teaches at Kingsborough Community College in Brooklyn and is the coordinator of WriteNet, T&W's online listserv. His poems have appeared in *Denver Quarterly*, *The Hat*, and *Fence*.

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DANIEL KANE: One of the things that surprised me in your book *Life & Death* was that in a number of your poems you used a relatively long line. Your work has, for many years now, been characterized by a short line featuring strong enjambment—the selection above from your long poem "Histoire de Florida" is an example. Since I've heard you read a number of times, I've noticed you really emphasize your short line breaks so that the poem on the page becomes a deliberate, oddly halting, and yet insistent physical voice in the ear. Did the longer line in your recent poems come about in a way that surprised you, or was it more a deliberate decision on your part? What do these long lines say about your poetic voice?



ROBERT CREELEY: They say a lot about the pace I now find most comfortable, tacitly one more reflective, less pressured by immediate feelings, more working its way along. A longer line slows things down in much the same sense that I am slowed down now by the fact of age. You probably know that William Carlos Williams's triadic line gave him useful location and resource in his old age. It offered determined "handholds" as he made his way through the pattern of sounds and rhythms otherwise possible. So I didn't think to move in these longer lines, particularly. They occurred as I wrote, proving the most viable and resourceful measure for what I was doing.

DK: Issues specific to mortality seem to rise to the surface in many of the poems in *Life & Death*. In a section of your long poem-series "Histoire de Florida," you write "Old persons swinging their canted metal detectors, / beach's either end out of sight beyond the cement block highrises, / occasional cars drifting by in the lanes provided...." I'm curious whether you wrote these long loping lines to suggest a kind of final inventory before death closes in. I ask this because there's a terrific scene from Wim Wenders's movie *Wings of Desire* in which a poor fellow, knocked off his motorcycle by a speeding car, begins to list all kinds of things he sees, along with authors, foods, and so on. I hate to sound so morbid, but....

RC: I don't recall any such specific preoccupation. Where I am is at the Atlantic Center for the Arts in Florida, with a company of ten other poets, each of us writing a block of whatever each day, for the mutual pile to be got to the next day. This prospect, like they say, is the beach at New Smyrna Beach, the comfortably common beach, where one sees everyone from local surfers to the people coming south for the winter. In this section I very much wanted a gathering rhythm—the "long loping lines" you noted—and you'll see that each verse is seven lines and there are four in all, making a kind of loop, or continuum—a form that has been central for me pretty much since an earlier sequence I wrote called "Helsinki Window." Life's at a stasis, so to speak. I need a form to deal with that fact. This whole poem is much involved with classic memory, from echoes of what I held to in youth as Stevens—and also Yeats, Pound, Chaucer, Wordsworth, Shakespeare, etc., etc. There are many echoes here and a very usual wonder as to how dying will occur and how one can admit it.

DK: In your poem "The Mirror," you wrote "Seeing is believing." For some reason, this familiar adage reminded me of the line from a James Schuyler poem, "No thing a symbol, every one real." Are you suggesting here that the physical situation is primary—that imagination is just a temporary funhouse to entertain oneself in while the physical truth of dissolution, visible at all times, in front of our noses, closes in?

RC: This was written in protest of the hopeless human slaughter in Rwanda. Little good it could do, but that's what "Seeing is believing..." refers to. It's to the point that I saw primarily with my imagination, using the images I as all were given as well as the memories I had from World War II in Burma. I am suggesting that we, humanly, cannot deny the evidence of such a multitude of corpses, that we must admit such deaths and their waste. Because we felt ourselves to be different from these people, we paid, like they say, all too little attention. Of course, any reader will have his or her sense of the occasion, just as you have.

DK: I'm fascinated by this. Why didn't you just say so—that is, why didn't you name the place, the time? How does poetry benefit from such elision?

RC: I can't now recall the name of the group that asked me and others to write something—it was to be used as part of a large public call for support. In retrospect, I don't think referring specifically to Rwanda would make the poem say more, so to speak—the context is finally a daily one for any of us. Ginsberg puts it aptly in "Laughing Gas": "What's the use avoiding rats / and horror, hiding from Cops / and dentists' drills? // Somebody will invent / a Buchenwald next door...."

DK: "The Mirror" also has the words, "a disgust for what we are." Much of your writing seems to me to walk on the tightrope of love and awe for the possibilities inherent in personal relationships on the one hand, and on the other a sense of disgust and even shame at the violence and nastiness we're capable of. I'm thinking here of your early poem "If You," in which you wrote: "A form of otherwise vicious habit / can have long ears and be called a rabbit." Is it fair to say this dilemma partly informs your poetics?

RC: I came of age in the Second World War and, being 4F, misguidedly wanted to "participate," and so joined the American Field Service. I ended up driving an ambulance in Burma—where I very quickly learned both the obvious uselessness of war and its grotesque highlighting of self-destructive human confusion. I don't think it's quite possible to realize the depth of that confusion until one is being shot at by altogether abstract agency, human or otherwise, bullets or bombs—put simply, someone is trying to kill you because he or she has been told to. It seems like ultimate black comedy. So I am saddened, to put it mildly, that so many years of my literal life have been witness to such repeatedly malignant acts as wars must constitute. That is the basic reason for the "sense of disgust," as you put it, "and even shame at the violence and nastiness we're capable of." Otherwise, "the vicious habit" you note in "If You" refers to a kind of rapacious sexual appetite that presumes all other humans are simply there for its use.

But trying to locate the boundaries for a poetics in a proposed dilemma of this kind, i.e., between some character



of (benign) love and the other use of “love” as sexual appetite, has not been my interest. “The poet thinks with his poem” (as Williams says) far better describes what my experience as a writer (poet included) has been.

DK: Our discussion about “The Mirror” has led me back to the first time I started reading you, which was when I was just about nineteen years old and, for the first time, read through Donald Allen’s anthology *The New American Poetry*. I found your poetry deeply emotional, responsive, indeed—and I don’t mean to offend you—wildly sentimental. Over the years, I’ve been surprised by how many critics and readers situate your poetry within the context of the experimental, when that word is being used more to denote radical experiments in form than anything else. Do you see a tension between your poetry as a love poetry in the lineage, say, of Thomas Hardy, and your poetry as a poetry of rupture, disjunction, and sonic/aural experimentation?

RC: Not really—in that in each case a particular facet or content or means evident in what I’ve written is being emphasized. To that extent it’s also being isolated from what else might be going on. I would think the most experimental instance of my poetry would be found in the form and content of my book *Pieces*, for example, and one might also use that work as fact of some of the most articulate “love poetry” I’ve written. One sees, as usual, what one’s looking for—at least that gets the primary attention.

DK: Are you suggesting that the meaning of a poem is primarily subjective, depending on the environment and desires of the individual reader? Does this open-ended way of looking at meaning seem right to you, or is it cause for anxiety—or at least frustration—on the part of the author who “knows” what he’s saying?

RC: I’d agree with Williams that “A new world is only a new mind,” that what one calls “imagination” is the means by which we experience “reality,” any reality. Having had one eye since the age of four, I know the world I see is not the normal one, no matter what the object of sight may be. I have no depth perception nor can I see three-dimensional images. All my sight thus is subjective and whatever the objective image might otherwise be is so altered.

Even more to the point here is [philosopher Ludwig] Wittgenstein’s “If you give it a meaning, it has a meaning.” The “you” is anyone at all. You might not agree with my meaning or even recognize that it exists, but it is there nonetheless. A poem may well have, in Charles Olson’s phrase, “some several causations”—reasons, points, purposes. There may well be a wish to say something specific and this is certainly a familiar and valid possibility for poetry.

But poetry is also a structure of words, or better put, a construction of words. And whatever one may have meant the construction to mean or say, the experience of others will also be a large factor in the stabilization of such meaning. Wars have many meanings for those involved with them—as

do poems, as do people. “Everybody’s right,” as Allen Ginsberg said. In any case, the author is not, presumably, only directing traffic toward a predestined meaning. What a bore that would be!

DK: In the context of this interview, which is meant for teachers of creative writing, among others, I’m wondering what you might say to a teacher who wants his or her students’ writing to make sense. I ask this because I recently heard from a teacher who was frustrated by what she deemed the “mechanical irrationality” of dada and surrealist-influenced writing. She wanted her students to have a message and get it across in “plain English.” Your poem “The Mirror” appears to suggest an alternative model.

RC: Sad to say, I have had little to do with creative writing as a pedagogic undertaking. In the thirty-four years I’ve taught now at SUNY Buffalo, I can’t have taught more than one or two classes of such kind. I have no messages simply contained in what I write, whatever my poems might be thought to say. “When I am in my painting,” Pollock says to make clear his sense of that situation. When I am in my writing, I am delighted by the activity permitted and so fostered—and simply want to keep it going. I think poetry can convey clear information both of feelings and of acts—but that need not be its responsibility or purpose. There are so many instances to the contrary, I hardly have to recall them here—from Lewis Carroll ad infinitum. Finally, the occasion of the poem may well be Rwanda—but the subject, if such it can be called, is the fact of common indifference to the suffering of others, justified by the presumption that “we are not like them.” In that sense, Rwanda is sadly just another occasion for this recognition.

DK: Getting back to questions of subjectivity and meaning, I’d like to ask you about your use of the abbreviation, “etc.” It’s one of the first things I noticed about your writing. Lines of yours like “I see the flames, etc.” have become an almost daily part of my consciousness. For me, the “etc.” serves as a tacit acknowledgment of the reader’s participation in the ongoing work of the poem. “Et cetera” keeps the possibilities of the poem—in terms of music and meaning—moving beyond the confines of the page. Have you thought extensively about the function and meaning of “etc.” in your poetry, and if so, could you tell us something about it?

RC: In the instance you are quoting (from my early poem “The Dishonest Mailman”) I hear “etc.” as words (*et cetera*) and repeat it in the ending of the next line, making a useful and ironic couplet. I wonder that all your questions thus far have had so little to do with the sounds of words, with the play of that fact. For my company one rule of thumb was Pound’s proposal of melopoeia, phanopoeia, and logopoeia—and the *melos* or melody of poetry has much occupied me over the years. Otherwise I have thought, as you say, “extensively” about “etc.”—and other things—all my life. “All the rest....” “The ten thousand things.”

DK: In “Histoire de Florida,” you incorporate lines of Wallace Stevens—“I placed a jar in Tennessee” is one—into the body of your stanzas. How has including other poets’ lines into your own writing, without citing them, affected your understanding and definition of a poetic music and voice?

RC: It’s like quoting in jazz. It lets one set an echo, tonal, rhythmic or otherwise, quickly into the pattern. It’s much like collage in visual art, for example. I was playing against the brilliantly flat abstraction of Stevens’s statement in his poem—whose literal precision I’d never forgotten. Truly, if one so places “a jar in Tennessee” or in the bathtub, or in the backyard, or just in your pocket, the “jar” begins to shape “reality” in consequence, much like the coke bottle in *The Gods Must Be Crazy*. (I wonder if the writer of that film was a Stevens aficionado!)

DK: You mention that Pound’s proposal of melopoeia has preoccupied you. I often hear echoes of certain music when reading your poems—the gestures of Cecil Taylor or Archie Shepp in your book *Pieces*, for example, or the more discreet, gentle and oddly disjunctive notes of Eric Satie in your book *Mirrors*. Have any musicians in particular influenced your writing, and if so, how has this influence manifested itself in your poetry?

RC: I think, with any of this, that one had best not be too didactic or literal. That is, I have used music as an instance or parallel rather than a prototype for what I wanted to do. Jazz gave me an ideal sense of the possibilities of improvisation within an often very simple pattern—for example, Charlie Parker’s endless changes on the melody of “I Got Rhythm.” Miles Davis (who I never got a chance to meet, sadly) seemed an absolute contemporary, born only a day or two after my own birthday. Cecil Taylor is a wonderful instance of crossover genius in all the terms of music, poetry and dance. I am honored that he knew my work from way back—as I did his, from the time Steve Lacy was playing with him in Boston in the 50s. Other defining people included Thelonious Monk, Bud Powell, Max Roach, Milt Jackson, John Coltrane, and Ornette Coleman (who told me once that Jayne Cortez got him to read my work), and on and on to a present friendship with the great bass player Steve Swallow. He, drummer Chris Massey, reeds David Cast, wonderful guitarist David Torn, and I have just put out a CD called *Have We Told You All You Thought To Know?*, a recording of a live performance in Buffalo two years ago. Steve had set ten of my poems in an earlier recording, *Home*, in the early 80s—and I should note also Steve Lacy’s recording of his setting of twenty poems a few years ago on a CD called *Futurities*. Musicians have always been allies, and have heard me loud and clear from the beginning.

Your mention of Satie is also much to the point. His “loops” were fascinating to me as were Anton Webern’s “reductions,” call them—i.e., his interest in duration and structure—how “long” did a composition have to be to work as such? Music and poetry have the obvious parallel of being

“forms cut in time,” of being serial patterns, consisting of sounds and rhythms in relation to time. One of my heroes is Thomas Campion, for example—who is an early, brilliant instance of this double.

DK: The music in *Life & Death* is certainly various. I was particularly moved by the section in “Histoire de Florida” where you repeat the phrases “You’ve left / it out” and “You’ve left / them out.” For example, one has the stanzas “You’ve left / them out / David / your son // Your friend / John / You’ve left / them out.” Beyond the narrative here, there are so many stories and games and chants that seem to be referenced—I think of alphabet songs, Shakespeare’s witches in *Macbeth* casting their spell, counting games. Of course, all these phenomena use repetition to determine form. How have you thought about the role of repetition as it plays itself out in your poetry and in the work of other writers?

RC: I remember when still in high school going with our class from West Acton into Boston, to see *Macbeth*—and that chant of the three witches has stayed in mind ever after. “When shall we three meet again....” Popular verse, like they say, uses repetition as a securing glue—the pattern of the blues is a useful example. Rhyme is repetition—of sounds, of rhythmic patterns, of thoughts. I often used the insistent repetition the couplet makes to bring disparate or discordant emphases together: “Bring it home to give it to you./ I have seen animals break in two.” Stephen Fredman (who read me so clearly in his initial work *Poet’s Prose*) notes a conjunction between Walt Whitman and myself I would never have thought of. It’s in his second book, *The Grounding of American Poetry: Charles Olson and the Emersonian Tradition*. He proposes Whitman and me as linked in our use of repetition. I was moved and delighted! Again he notes very usefully the so-called “parallelism” we both use as a means for structure.

DK: Since many teachers will be reading this interview, I’m curious to know how you were introduced to poetry—could you give us a bit of literary autobiography, mentioning some of the primary texts that turned you on to poetry and that, most importantly, distinguished poetry as an event or genre somehow distinct from prose?

RC: A book called *First Loves\**, published last spring, is useful not only for my information but some sixty-seven other poets’ as well. My sister, four years older, was much involved with poetry and wrote it with active effect. Perhaps it was sibling rivalry that set me off. She introduced me to crucial books when I was ten or so, including poetry. Then teachers were a decisive link—as a survey done recently by the Academy of American Poets makes very clear. Teachers are the majority by far of those who bring the young to poetry. My grandmother—my mother’s mother—was also a great lover of poetry and could recite it gloriously. My sister asked her once why she knew so much of it and she

\* Carmela Ciuraru, ed. *First Loves: Poets Introduce the Essential Poems That Captivated and Inspired Them* (Scribner, 2000).

answered that she liked to have something in her head. As the note in *First Loves* makes clear, it was the emotional and erotic rush of poetry that first got to me—Alfred Noyes’s “The Highwayman” was the instance. I loved the weave of such feeling in the securing and locating sounds and rhythms. Eliot and Longfellow, all the same! I guess that if I needed to choose one precept that most served my senses of poetry over the years, it would be Pound’s injunction: “Listen to the sound that it makes!” Whether it was James Whitcomb Riley or William Carlos Williams—that’s where I always came in.



If you are looking for a good venue for your students’ writing and useful writing resources including books or examples of great writers who published in their teens, we recommend visiting the Merlyn’s Pen website ([www.merlynspen.com](http://www.merlynspen.com)). You can also write to Jim Stahl, *Merlyn’s Pen*, P.O. Box 910, East Greenwich, RI 02818-0910.

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Teachers & Writers Collaborative sends creative writers into schools and other settings to conduct writing workshops with students, teachers, and other members of the community. The work of Teachers & Writers Collaborative is made possible in part by grants from the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs and the National Endowment for the Arts, and with public funds from the New York State Council on the Arts, a State Agency. Teachers & Writers Collaborative is also grateful for support from the following foundations and corporations: Axe-Houghton Foundation, The David and Minnie Berk Foundation, Bronx Borough President and City Council, The Bydale Foundation, The Cerimon Fund, Chase Manhattan Bank, The Saul Z. and Amy S. Cohen Family Foundation, Con Edison, E.H.A. Foundation, Thomas Phillip Johnson and Jane Moore Johnson Foundation, The Janet Stone Jones Foundation, Low Wood Fund, Inc., M & O Foundation, NBC, New York Community Trust (Beth M. Uffner and Van Lier Funds), New York Times Company Foundation, Henry Nias Foundation, North Star Fund, The Open Society Institute, Queens Borough President and City Council, Joshua Ringel Memorial Fund, Maurice R. Robinson Fund, Rush Philanthropic Arts Foundation, The Scherman Foundation, the Wallace-Reader’s Digest Funds, and the Wendling Foundation. T&W’s 30th-Anniversary Endowed Residencies are supported by Marvin Hoffman and Rosellen Brown, the New World Foundation, Steven Schrader, Alison Wylegala (in memory of Sergio Guerrero), John Gilman (in memory of June Baker), and anonymous donors.



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