

TEACHING POETRY AT GREAT MEADOW PRISON

The prison is located just off the east shore of the Champlain Barge Canal in the town of Comstock. To the west Putnam Mountain rises some 1600 feet marking the eastern boundary of the Adirondack Forest Preserve. As I flash my I.D. at the guard posted on the gate and enter the prison parking lot, I wonder what effect this high forested ridge has on the men doing time within Great Meadow. Are they, most of whom come from urban areas, as bewildered by its dominating presence as I am by the inner core of the cities where they grew up?

Today is the beginning of the Winter Semester for the University Without Walls, a program which enables prisoners to earn college credits and to eventually be placed in universities and colleges when they have served their time. It is also my first experience teaching a poetry workshop inside a maximum security prison. I have already met and spoken with most of my students during an informal evening of poetry readings the previous week, but I am still a little apprehensive since at that time, I was accompanied by the U.W.W. coordinator, Joseph Bruchac.

At the Administration building I pass in front of a glass enclosed check office and again identify myself to the officer posted within. I hear a loud buzzer; then a heavy steel door opens, and I step in out of the cold into the central office. After I have signed the visitor's log, a guard asks me to empty all the metal objects from my pockets into a small plastic bowl and walk through a metal detector. The detector light flashes red indicating that I am still carrying some metal. "Go over there to the corner," says the guard in a neutral voice. He runs his portable "frisker" from my armpits to my ankles and when he reaches my shoes the gadget begins to buzz. Apparently my shoe eyelets are made of metal. After he inspects my brief case, he escorts me to the classroom wing. With me trailing, he proceeds down a long hallway unlocking two heavy barred doors, an assortment of keys jingling on his belt.

We emerge momentarily into a mall-like area which is a four-tiered cell block with a ceiling like a gymnasium. Here we encounter groups of blue-shirted officers with night sticks hanging from their waists. Prisoners wearing green pants, workshirts, and black laced shoes mill around smoking or chatting. Swinging through another thick door, we continue down a brick hallway. Dusty pale gray windows reveal the exercise yard outside. The hallway is cold and drafty, but it warms up as we mount a set of stairs. At the top my guide unlocks the door to the classroom wing, and I thank him and go up some more stairs to my room to await my students.

As I nervously arrange course description sheets in neat piles and place books and other materials within easy reach, the students begin to drift into the class. "Hello, I'm Paul Corrigan," I greet them. I wonder just how forward or aloof I should be on this first night of class. They nod casually, a little more cautious than they were the previous week when we first got together to read from our poetry. It isn't a big class, just ten students, and I am grateful that the room is comfortable and intimate and not a cavernous echo chamber. On the rear wall is a large seascape painted possibly by one of the inmates. In it, huge breakers curl onto a rocky coast. The painting seems out of place, but I like the offbeat quality that it lends the room. The frothy violence of the waves tinges our surroundings with an air of excitement. Since it is a little warm, I open the gray, opaque windows. They can only be pushed outward about eight inches before they strike the outer bars.

As we arrange the desks in a circle, one of the more outgoing members of the class, sensing my nervousness, grins reassuringly. "You oughta take it easy, ya know." I laugh. At forty-one he is by far the oldest member of the class. His small stature and wiry quickness make him seem much younger. He speaks in a rapid, sure manner that complements his agile features. I will later learn that many of the men rely on him to help ease them through difficulties that arise in their lives. His reassuring

chatter and his ability to calmly size up a situation make him a source of stability in the uncertain environment of the prison.

I hand out the course syllabus and begin my talk. Everyone listens attentively to my explanation of the format of a poetry workshop; how shared critical observations can help workshop members improve their writing. The room is hushed. A student strums his fingers gently against his desktop. Another exhales deeply and stretches his long legs. I look at the clock and discover that I've been speaking for twenty-five minutes. A brief twinge of panic flashes through my mind. I have covered nearly all my topics and there is still an hour and a half to go.

"Why do you want to write? What do you hope to gain from a poetry workshop?" I launch my questions at the first man who catches my eye hoping to get a discussion going. Caught by surprise, he is silent a moment then says, "I like to write because it helps me cut loose some of the frustration I feel. I used to write poetry to my wife in all my letters. I could say the things I wanted to say to her with poetry, but I still don't know enough about it. I hope this class shows me what poetry's all about."

As each man speaks I discover an underlying confidence in his manner of expression, a confidence that I've rarely found in the college and high school classes that I've worked with. There is an unafraid strength in the words of even the one or two men for whom English is not an original language, a tacit understanding of the importance of expressing one's individuality through speech. More importantly, each man supports the others' views.

Anthony Jackson makes a strong connection between the experience of prison life and his desire to write poetry. He sees poetry as a way of shaping the often tedious details of his life into a coherently ordered expression. George Berkey was writing years before he came to prison and therefore has a more sophisticated attitude toward the craft of poetry. The others simply enjoy their new-found ability to use words and would like to find out more about the structure of poems. They do not feel that they are unique for wanting to write. They see poetry as a necessary outlet and a means of refining their expression.

We talk for a long time, occasionally wandering off the topic into the realm of personal experiences. Since I figure that it all has to do with poetry, I let the discussion go where it wants. Soon there are only five minutes left on the clock. The men, knowing that they will soon have to return to their cell blocks, give me some of their poetry to look at for the next time. During the week I will photo-copy selections of their work for the next class. They are a little reticent about handing me work for the first time, but underneath this feeling, I sense that they are beginning to trust me and that they take a genuine pride in their writing and would like to know ways of improving it. Suddenly the bell rings. I gather up books and papers and, breathing easy again, head down the long corridors leading to the outside.

Paul Corrigan