Books

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LIVES ON THE BOUNDARY: THE STRUGGLES AND ACHIEVEMENTS OF AMERICA'S UNDERPREPARED by Mike Rose

“Decayed Images of the Possible”

In a late 1982 essay printed in The New York Times series entitled “The Making of a Writer,” Francine du Plessix Gray, the recently-celebrated journalist and novelist, recalls a recurring—and particularly harrowing—nightmare from her youth:

Facing a friend, I struggle for words and emit no sound, I have an urgent message to share but am struck dumb. My jaw is clamped shut as in a metal vise. I gasp for breath and cannot set my tongue free. And at the dream’s end, my friend has fled and I am locked into the solitude of silence.

Du Plessix Gray attributes the recurrence of this nightmare, at least in part, to her father’s impatience with her youthful writing, to his swift and sardonic tongue, and to his constantly interrupting her when she tried to speak. The passage continues:

So it may have begun, the central torment of my life, my simultaneous need to commit fantasies to paper and the terror that accompanies that need, the leaden slowness of the word’s arrival, my struggle with the clamped metal jaws of mouth and mind.

Later, as a student at a writing workshop at Black Mountain College, du Plessix Gray submitted revisions of several prize-winning stories from her undergraduate years at Barnard. After having read them, her mentor, no less a towering and imposing figure than the six-foot-eight poet Charles Olsen, told her: “You’re writing pure junk. . . . If you want to be a writer keep it to a journal. . . . And above all don’t try to publish anything for ten years.”

Francine du Plessix Gray’s first piece of fiction was published in The New Yorker one year past the distant deadline Charles Olsen had set for her. In struggling to come to terms with why she had persisted in writing, despite what she called “the continuing anguish of the act,” and the dissatisfaction she—and obviously others—felt toward the results, du Plessix Gray explained:

I write out of a desire for revenge against reality, to destroy forever the stuttering powerless child I once was, to gain the love and attention that silenced child never had, to allay the dissatisfaction I still have with myself, to be something other than what I am. . . . I remain sustained by a definition of faith once offered me by Ivan Illich: “Faith is a readiness for the surprise.” I write because I have faith in the possibility that I can eventually surprise myself. I am still occasionally plagued by that recurring nightmare of my jaw being clamped shut, my mouth frozen in silence. But I wake up from it with less dread, with the hope that some day my tongue will loosen and emit a surprising new sound which even I, at first, shall not be able to understand.

These statements by Francine du Plessix Gray evoke far more than the appreciable pleasure of a successful modern-day rendition of the Orphic myth. What I find remarkable in them is that du Plessix Gray speaks to us from both sides of what she calls “the solitude of silence.”

Du Plessix Gray is quite clearly someone who has come to terms with her skills and intentions,
if not entirely with her ambitions, as a writer. So too, most of us who write know all too well something of the anguish bristling in that image of a jaw’s being “clamped shut.” Facing such predicaments, we, like du Plessix Gray, can be encouraged by Ivan Illich’s definition of “faith”: “a readiness for the surprise.” Part of the enduring pleasure of writing for each of us is precisely that element of surprise, that life-long pleasure in discovering new dimensions of our own resourcefulness with language, of evoking new ways to know ourselves and the world that is larger than the self. We write not only to discover meaning; we write to create meaning. We write not only to discover the self; we write to create the self.

Mike Rose has written a compelling book on the struggles and the achievements of America’s underprepared to use language to discover and create the self. His view of people with jaws “clamped shut” includes none of the privileged socio-cultural circumstances of du Plessix Gray’s education. What is so remarkable about Rose’s Lives on the Boundary is that in it he speaks from both sides of what Francine du Plessix Gray calls “the solitude of silence.” A masterful blend of autobiography, vignette, case study, reflection, and analysis, Lives on the Boundary is also the most searing commentary we have had in years on the institutional neglect and mismanagement to which working-class Americans are subjected in the name of education:

We have provided elementary education for virtually all Americans for some time now, and we fret more than many societies do about meeting the diverse needs of these young people. We test them and assess them—even kindergartners are given an array of readiness measures—in order to determine what they know and don’t know, can and can’t do. The supreme irony, though, is that the very means we use to determine those needs—and the various remedial procedures that derive from them—can wreak profound harm on our children, usually, but by no means only, those who are already behind the economic and political eight ball.

The problems Rose identifies with American education are principally institutional; his portraits of young ethnics and older students trying to reclaim their intelligences through literacy reveal that deficiencies in American education are endemic to the system, not the students. And he views that world in tough-minded terms. “It would be an act of hollow and evil optimism,” Rose explains, “to downplay the problems of American schools—the way they’re structured and financed, the unevenness of their curricula, the low status of their teachers, their dreary record with the poor and disenfranchised...” He documents the nature and extent of those problems in an engaging series of personal portraits, including scenes from his own life on the streets.

Rose, a prominent contributor to the distinguished writing program at U.C.L.A., was born in Altoona, Pennsylvania, to parents who met at a “steamy diner with twangy-voiced waitresses and graveyard stew.” When the Pennsylvania railroad abandoned the town, his family moved to Southern California and promptly fell into what he calls “the abyss of Paradise.” As a youngster Rose was labelled a “slow learner” and placed in the “vocational track” because his standardized test scores “got confused with another student named Rose.” He went to school, he explains, and “sat in class and memorized more than understood and whistled past the academic graveyard”:

If you’re a working-class kid in the vocational track...you’re defined by your school as “slow”; you’re placed in a curriculum that isn’t designed to liberate you but to occupy you, or, if you’re lucky, train you, though the training is for work the society does not esteem....

Like innumerable students in similar circumstances, Rose’s sensibility comes alive as soon as
he leaves the confines of the classroom and releases himself into the flow of life on the streets. In a Whitmanesque series of catalogues, Rose bathes himself in the opulent energy and rhythms of the street people and scenes in east L.A. His richly-textured blend of observation, inference, and cultural nuance recreates one memorable scene, one memorable portrait, after another—from “transvestites with rouge the color of bacon” to “isolationist fantasies of the demi-monde” that would “yield another kind of death, a surrender to the culture’s lost core.” Each of Rose’s sentences is mooed in what William James calls “the grub fact” of experience. In this respect, the book draws much of its power from an exquisitely simple pattern of observation and inference. And what makes the pattern—and the rhythm of the sentences that highlight the pattern—so memorable is Rose’s skill at observing so carefully. He has an ethnographer’s eye and a poet’s sensitivity to nuances of detail. His observations are precise and ripe with implicitness, as, for example, in the following succinct characterization of the cultural complexities of life in southern California: “Palm trees swaying on cotton shirts, Pakistans on skateboards....” The only item missing from Rose’s masterful catalogue of life in and around an urban elementary parochial school is the chance book.

Rescued in his sophomore year of high school by Brother Clint, his biology teacher, who puzzled over “this Voc Ed. kid who was racking up 98s and 99s on his tests,” Rose gradually found himself under the tutelage of Jack MacFarland, his English teacher, and absorbed in the worlds of writing and reading: “It was heady stuff. I felt like a Pop Warner athlete on steroids.” Through MacFarland’s intercession, Rose was admitted to Loyola University in Los Angeles, where he nervously entered the conversations of academic life. The generous attention of several teachers there helped him earn a graduate fellowship to the English Department at U.C.L.A., where he wrote poetry that sounded like “Tammy Wynette singing haiku” and studied literature with professors who, he quickly came to realize, “pursued the little-known fact, the lost letter, the lucky fissure in language that invites one more special reading.” He resigned his fellowship and turned to experimental psychology: “I learned to be cautious and methodical. And I began to appreciate the remarkable complexity of human action and the difficulty of attributing causality to any one condition or event.”

Through his service in the Teacher Corps in East L. A., his experience as a counselor of Vietnam veterans, and his experience as a tutor of E.O.P. (Equal Opportunity) students at U.C.L.A., as well as in his volunteer work at a suicide prevention center, Rose learns to live “with decayed images of the possible” and to subvert a system that focuses on what students don’t have rather than on the verbal and cultural resources they bring with them to schools and colleges. “Let them see what, collectively, they do know,” he urges, “and students will, together, begin to generate meaning and make connections.”

In the process of redefining goals and shifting attitudes in American education, Rose turns upside down our expectations of the meaning of such simple phrases as “the wealth of have-nots” and celebrates the resiliency as well as the determination of those who “live on the margins” to establish increasing authority over their verbal lives. Rose’s subject might well evoke comparisons between his book and Mina Shaughnessy’s seminal study of basic writers, Errors and Expectations. While Shaughnessy and Rose share professional goals and in many cases accomplishments, their perspectives are fundamentally different. Mike Rose writes as an "insider": each of the problems he describes he experienced first-hand. “I was living through,” he explains, “the very conflicts I was cutting and pasting into my notebooks—the conflict between two visions: one of individual possibility and one of environmental limits and determiners.”

Harrowing scenes from his own schooling come back to haunt him at U.C.L.A.—in the presence of the complicated lives of people fundamentally
miscast as illiterate. Rose's portraits of his students form an American gallery of the educationally underprivileged. And what is so memorable about Mike Rose's Lives on the Boundary is his remarkable ability to recreate the quiet expressiveness of the students with whom he works by modestly stepping back and letting us hear these students speak for themselves. The effect is that Rose enables us to hear how jaws previously "clamped shut" can relax into their eloquence.

The most memorable accounts in Lives on the Boundary are the powerful, heart-wrenching vignettes Rose develops of the working-class students whom he has helped over the years. These are people who seem reluctant—or unwilling—to claim any authority for their perceptions, for their ideas, or, more importantly, for themselves. Most, if not all of the members of their families are on the receiving end of experience rather than at its origin. It can even be said of some family members that they have not determined the history of their own lives. These students don't normally generate experiences; they join in. Given the state of the economy, they don't see either their parents or themselves as people who are literally or figuratively "going places." They can muster painfully little evidence of their parents'—or their own—participation in any formidable way in the world around them. And, in many cases, the family's material well-being depends on the parents' keeping one step ahead of what the plant manager calls "technological efficiency" or "cost accounting."

There is, in effect, an almost pervasive sense among these students and their families of being expendable. These are people who feel that their work (be it manual or intellectual) does not express enough that is unique in themselves to win the respect of others as individuals.

These are people for whom the word "authority" exists solely in its plural form—the "authorities." It's a concept that most of Rose's students don't perceive as an activity in their lives, as an experience fundamentally accessible to them, as something negotiable. More specifically, the students

Rose describes most often regard "authority" as an entity, not as an interpretive process. They apparently imagine it, they hear the term, principally as a voice telling what not to do and what to do rather than as a self-generated state of mind, as the ability to articulate and control the states of consciousness they value. Yet what makes Lives on the Boundary so inspiring a book to read is Rose's conviction that the prospects are brighter than previously imagined that these students, with the assistance of faculty dedicated both to humanistic principles and to the best interests of their students, will gain increasing authority and exercise increasing mastery over their verbal lives.

I have one reservation about Mike Rose's Lives on the Boundary; what he calls "the stuff of literacy" I would call "literature." When Rose talks about his students' apparent interest in "conveying something meaningful, communicating information, creating narratives, shaping what we see and feel and believe into written language, listening to and reading stories, playing with the sounds of words," he creates the prospect of the enduring pleasures of his students' creating literature; what Lives on the Boundary underscores is that literature can surface far beyond the restrictive boundaries of canonical texts, that literature is a fundamental, and enabling, dimension of all of our lives, no matter how seemingly marginal the positions of the people who produce these new texts.

As teachers and writers, we can find in Rose's Lives on the Boundary powerful reminders of our students'—and by extension our citizenry's—struggles (not, finally, unlike each of our own) to loosen jaws "clamped shut." However hesitantly our students may speak at first, they can relax into their own eloquence. And I suspect that it is our collective belief in the principles of a fully literate democracy and our faith in our students' abilities to surprise us—just as we take special pleasure in surprising ourselves as thinkers and writers—that impel us to teach as best we can year

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after year. We are, after all, engaged in the collaborative enterprise of educating people to educate themselves and others.

As Mike Rose has done for his students, we need to help students to recognize as soon as possible and cultivate as best they can their own authority for their work. Many students are not ready to sustain themselves in what du Plessix Gray calls "the solitude of silence." Most students cannot literally or figuratively wait du Plessix Gray's eleven years before speaking publicly, before registering their voices in the consciousness of the communities and cultures in which they are expected to participate. And given the socio-economic, political, and cultural deprivation that haunts so many dimensions of contemporary American life, the risks seem more urgent—the stakes higher—than even the losses implicit in "the solitude of silence." Mike Rose eloquently demonstrates in Lives on the Boundary that as writers and teachers, our purposes should result in more than a "faith" in "the readiness for the surprise." Without encouraging—and actively assisting—all of our students to do more writing and reading as well as to understand the nature of their own authority in relation to these acts, we may find ourselves, along with our students, in far more harrowing circumstances—struggling to express our individual and collective identities in what Paulo Freire has called "the culture of silence." Mike Rose's Lives on the Boundary offers eloquent evidence that each of us can succeed.

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