

## *Teaching Poetry Writing to the Old and the Ill*

KENNETH KOCH\*

*Department of English, Columbia University*

*What led you to choose a nursing home as a place to teach poetry, as opposed to a prison or any other sort of institutional setting?*

It was completely an accident. I was asked by the Rhode Island State Arts Council to do some work in the schools in Providence. I was there for three or four days, and one Sunday afternoon they took me to the Jewish Old Age Home in Providence. I went there with a few other poets, and there were some high school kids there to help out too, and I was very interested in what happened—in how responsive the old people were to the poetry class, and in the quality of what they wrote. I felt, too, something like a relief from a sort of guilt—or some kind of strong discomfort—that I had often felt in the presence of old and ill persons. Perhaps a kind of powerlessness is the best way to describe it—a powerlessness to be close to them, to give them things and to get things in return. On this Sunday, in any case, that barrier seemed to have broken down. I was enjoying these people that I never thought I would be able to enjoy. I was enjoying them in the same way my tennis teacher and I enjoy each other; we love something, we're both doing something that we like to do. And I like him for other reasons too, he's become a friend of mine, but at first it was really just tennis.

\*A conversation with David P. Willis.

I found that I didn't feel bad about being with these people, that I wasn't worried about them. You know, I incline to worry about people one can help but it's hard to know what to do in a room full of old and sick people. But I felt good about this poetry lesson—I like teaching poetry and saw how they liked it, so I didn't have that usual feeling of constraint. And I was interested in that, and that made me feel good because I was interested in how responsive they were. The other thing I was interested in, very interested, was the quality of the things they wrote. When I typed it up afterwards and I'd looked at it, there was a kind of objectivity, some kind of funny indifference almost, a sense of space and time, just a little tiny touch of it, very small, like the taste of a very, very, very old wine, just a little something that was odd, and I think what I was mainly interested in and attracted by was the chance that there might be some interesting poetry that might really come out of people like this, really there might be a poetry there; it was slightly different from anything I'd seen in poetry before. I thought maybe I'd seen a little something like it in old Chinese poetry, a little bit of that calm objectivity, a quality which isn't found in Anglo-Saxon poetry.

So, I came back to New York and I spoke to my publishers about this, both Jason and Barbara Epstein, I showed them what the old people had written. I got, through the help of two organizations, Hospital Audiences and Poets and Writers, part of the New York State Arts Council, a very modest sum of money, and Hospital Audiences found me a nursing home which was not involved in litigation. I just wanted some place where there'd be people like those in the Jewish Old Age Home in Providence. I was, I think, more interested in the people's being institutionalized, in their being in a nursing home because I knew it would give continuity to what I did, the same people would be there, and there was something about the situation—they were so separated from life. I didn't want to do this teaching mainly out of compassion. I think it's important to say that because it may be, for some people, a mistake to wait until they really have a warm, compassionate feeling about working with old people. I got such feelings after I started teaching, but I began the teaching mainly out of esthetic interest, I did it out of a spirit of research, sort of, a real interest in what would happen for poetry and what kind of teaching would work. After I got to know the people I began to see that it made them a little happy, or very happy, and of course by then I cared about that.

*You've taught poetry to children and to old people; and the work in the two different settings is fully seven years apart, and the settings are even light-years apart in terms of their ambience. There are some very remarkable similarities I noted in the approach used and the excitement generated. I was struck particularly by your repeated reference in the two books to your students' desire and need for concentration, confidence, and communication. These seem to be needs in both students and prerequisites to their writing good poetry.*

Let's see. Some of the things you said are new to me, I haven't thought of them in that form. You said that confidence, communication, and concentration were necessary in order for them to write poetry, and that I gave them these so that they could write poetry. I hadn't thought of separating it that way—it's very interesting. The main addition I could make to it is to say that these qualities were not given to them before they wrote; rather, they got these qualities through their writing. Through writing poetry they did seem to get more confidence, at least about writing poetry. They certainly began to get the feeling that they were communicating, and certainly, as they learned more how to write, and enjoyed it, they concentrated on it more, just as someone who knows how to play baseball can concentrate more on baseball than someone who doesn't know what a bat or ball is, there's nothing to concentrate on. But this happened through writing rather than being a prerequisite for writing. But, then, as I think further about what you said, probably another interesting part is that actually in the way I taught them is something that led them, while they were writing, to be more concentrated. That is to say, I started with what was natural to their speech; I told them that that was good for poetry. I kept adding things gradually that made it obvious both to me and to them when they heard the poems read back, that their work was really good and interesting in a literary way. This gave them the kind of confidence that one needs in order to concentrate. I think the analogy of baseball is a pretty good one—it's impossible to concentrate on something you don't understand. I have never been able to concentrate on fixing my car because I don't know anything about it, whereas if I had a really good teacher, an automobile mechanic, who would say, "Well, Kenneth, I think your way of checking everything to see if it's securely fastened is one good way to start. I think your way of trying to start the car

three times instead of just giving up after the first time is good. Now, I'll tell you something to do after you've tried to start it three times: here's something you might try, you might open the hood and put some . . . ,” I mean, if I had a good teacher I could learn to concentrate on fixing my car. The need to communicate seems harder to talk about, because poetry is such an odd kind of communication. Certainly, poetry enables one to take feelings seriously and to talk about them. One odd thing is that they may be feelings one didn't know one had. And they may be expressed in unusual ways, as in this poem by Sam Rainey, for example:

The quietest time I ever remember in my life  
Was when they took off my leg.

Another quiet time is when you're with someone you like  
And you're making love.

And when I hit the number and won eight hundred dollars  
That was quiet, very quiet.

Poetry isn't, in the ordinary sense, what I'd call “self-expression.” What kind of self-expression is “The Divine Comedy,” or “The Waste Land,” or even Robert Herrick's “Grace for a Child,” which is only four lines long? I mean, in a way, it seems more like something else than like self-expression; it seems more like a poet using feelings, memories, sensations, and ideas that he has somewhere in him, in the present or recoverable from the past, using them to make something beautiful, using them to make something which will probably communicate the strength of these feelings and sensations to others through language, and I think of poetry, and I think it's especially important to think of it that way when working with old people where there's always the danger that what one does will be regarded as a kind of therapy, I think of it not as their expressing themselves, but of their making something, their accomplishing something, that is, creating works of art. I guess I feel that “communicating” has a kind of antiseptic atmosphere, and I don't want writing poetry to be associated with that. Writing poetry can do things for one that other kinds of communicating can't do. I remember when I was teaching school children to write poetry, and had written a little about it, a friend of mine who is one of the directors of the National Council of Teachers of English, said, “Ken, it's

wonderful what you're doing with the children in poetry. Do you find it's good for their grammar and spelling?" And I said, "When you see Rudolf Nureyev sailing through the air, do you imagine it's good for his posture? I imagine it is!" But to be a great dancer or to write a poem does something else for you. Of course it's good for their grammar, too. If they have something to say, later they will want to know how to say it.

*Well, how important, though, is it to instill in children or old people the confidence of knowing that they have, in fact, something to say? You did note that early in your work at the nursing home you found people rather quiet, taciturn, withdrawn, many of them I would imagine didn't realize they had anything to say; perhaps no one had been accustomed to listening.*

"Instilling" again suggests that there is a preparation and that then there's writing—whereas with my method of teaching there is, in a certain sense, no preparation. All that happens happens from writing. I begin to give people confidence by having them write as soon as possible. The first time I went in the nursing home, I did not explain what poetry was, or persuade people they had something to communicate; just tried, very soon, to have everybody write one line. Then I read this back and showed them that they got pleasure from it because they did, they got something which can only be a certain kind of—if it's not pure esthetic pleasure, it's certainly related to it, and they were immediately in the situation—they were doing it.

That's the way I teach, so that there's not an instilling. The danger there is that, you see, what some teachers do is, everything is a preparation, and preparation can get very boring. I mean, I stopped taking piano lessons because—I had started studying piano rather late in life when I was twenty-one or something, and I was playing some Chopin and Bach, but I was having a lot of fun. Then I went to Harvard and I got a piano teacher who said, "Now, you must do a lot of exercises first," and all she'd let me do was scales and lower my hands on the keys, and I stopped playing the piano. I just wanted to play, and preparing is not playing. Once people are interested in something, they're willing to do quite a lot of work, but I did all the teaching while they were working. To answer more

directly, I think what we are talking about is an important pedagogical issue, that is, I think in teaching an art, the way I teach, right away the people practice the art, no matter in how primitive a way they practice it, they do it.

To answer more specifically, how the people got confidence about writing, or why they changed from thinking they had nothing to say to thinking that they did, there were several parts to that. One is, I don't know the motivation for their saying that they had nothing to say. What they said was, some of them, "I have nothing to say; I'm no good; I don't remember anything." Well, one naturally picks up the most vulnerable of those statements to show them that it's not true, which is "I don't remember anything." So I asked, "Where were you born?" Almost everybody knows where he was born. In fact, none of these people had any problems with past memories. A few seemed to have a little problem with recent memory, I mean, a few did have that problem, but it didn't seem to be a problem in their writing. I would say, "Just tell me anything you remember" and say, "All right, you were born in Georgia. Tell me one thing you remember about Georgia. We'll have a poem about Georgia." I would write that down and say, "You want that to be the first line in the poem." Right away, it was in a poem. It wasn't preparing. When you prepare you can always have the feeling, "Oh, I'll never make it," but they were already doing it, making up a poem.

*I find it's quite interesting that you say that memory loss wasn't a very severe problem. In reading the biographical sketches at the end of the book, I'd say that you probably had a reasonable cross section of nursing home population. A clinician or a therapist would have probably been immobilized by what they would see as memory loss.*

Well, of course, I wasn't approaching them trying to see what they'd forgotten, but urging them to use what they remembered. In the book I describe another example of this. It happened with one woman particularly, Nadya Catalfano, working with Kate Farrell. Nadya kept saying she didn't have anything to say, and Kate asked her to remember something, and she said, "Well, all I remember is my grandmother is going to give me a whipping," and Kate said,

“That’s nice.” Nadya was listening to music, so Kate looked at Nadya and said, “What else does music make you think of?” and Nadya said, “Oh, that’s not any good, that’s not poetry, nobody cares about that, that’s childish, that’s just childish things.” And then Kate told her that childish things are a part of what poetry is all about and that everybody’s most important feelings and memories are kind of childish, I mean, you want to be liked, you want somebody to like you, and you remember your dog, and that there’s a lot of that in poetry, so she got Nadya to tell her some more childish things, read the poem back to her. Nadya liked it, I read the poem aloud to the class, other people liked it and thought it was a good poem. Later Nadya wrote some beautiful poems about “childish” things:

#### AUTUMN

Your leaves were yellow  
 And some of them were darker  
 And I picked them up  
 And carried them in the house  
 And put them in different vases  
 Your leaves sound different  
 I couldn’t understand why  
 The leaves at that time of year  
 Had a rustle about them  
 And they would drop  
 At the least little thing  
 And I would listen  
 And pick up some of them.

*Nadya Catalfano*

You know, I think one thing is that old people are compared to children so much in a derogatory way that they’re afraid of saying things that sound childish, so that could be a barrier to their writing poetry.

*On the other hand, children and very old people are not generally embarrassed by one another, and those of us in the middle can be embarrassed by either end of that age scale, but the very old and the very young seem to have a great tolerance for one another. It’s quite interesting that they do. I wonder if, perhaps, it isn’t that they really*

*do have many shared needs, such as a need for recognition, a need for acceptance, and a need to make independent choices, which has been denied to so many old people, especially once they're institutionalized.*

Old people and children may have, in a stronger than usual form, certain needs which everyone has. But I don't believe old people identify themselves with children—if the two groups get along well, it's more likely it's because they're not prejudiced against each other. Children haven't learned that prejudice yet, and old people are beyond it.

*Had you ever had the old people write about children or children about old people?*

There are several reasons why I didn't do that. One is that I think that either children or old people, or anyone, for that matter, who is not a very sophisticated writer, confronted with this subject that is large in general, and a subject about which there are feelings you are supposed to have, children are beautiful, they're so innocent and sweet; old age is dignified, majestic, and gracious, or old age is sad and horrible, any . . . my poetry ideas never worked when they were about things that were general, and about which you're supposed to feel a certain way. The worst lesson I had in the nursing home was when I asked my students to write about growing old, because I was asking them to write on something that they knew what they were supposed to feel about. They wrote beautifully about growing old when I asked them to write about colors, about talking to the moon and stars, even when I asked them to write about writing poetry because naturally they thought about it, but it wasn't a subject that you'd confront directly. Nor do I think childhood is a subject they'd be likely to be able to write about directly without artificiality and sentimentality. An indirect approach is better. One asks students, "Write a poem in which, in the first line, you say something you did when you were ten years old; in the second line, something you did when you were five years old; in the third line, something you did when you were fifteen." Such a proposal can in-