

11 It Is Ourselves that We Remake: Teaching Creative Writing in Prison

Diane Kendig
University of Findlay, Ohio

Since 1984 I have taught one-fourth of my regular university assignment in our prison program. Our writing program there began with two composition courses and has grown—along with the program itself—to include an additional three creative writing courses, a Visiting Writers series, and an extracurricular writers workshop. We did not begin the program with plans to expand the creative writing component. Rather, we were moved to expand the offerings by the talent and needs of the students. In the ensuing years, we have been grateful for the anthologies and critical studies of prison literature that have helped us to understand what teaching creative writing in prison means.¹

H. Bruce Franklin's *Prison Literature In America: The Victim as Criminal and Artist* has been particularly helpful. It analyzes several themes that run through American prison literature from earliest slave chants up to the literature of the modern prison. It concentrates on the dialectic of two concurrent themes in the literature: "a collective revolutionary consciousness based on the Black historical experience and the loneliness of the isolated convict ego" (261). At the end of his introduction to the expanded edition of the study, Franklin mentions, in passing, that a third theme that drives the teaching of creative writing in prison: "the urgency and difficulty of communicating to the rest of America" (xv). This theme is central, too, to the creative writing classroom in prison.

In our roles as both "the rest of America," and as the intermediaries between the inmates and "the rest of America," creative writing teachers face our own urgencies and difficulties, some of which I would like to discuss here, many of which bear on the teaching of creative writing in general. First, let us consider the urgencies and difficulties that inmate writers face.

The Difficulty of Words

During our first year in medium security, we witnessed the actual physical pain that written communication caused our incarcerated students. One colleague, who has taught English in prison for years, had a student come to her to explain why he could not write a response journal for her literature class. He had made it a practice, he explained, to eat any personal writing in his possession. She was at first unfazed, assuming that "eat" was prison slang for "getting rid of," and then she was shocked to hear the inmate explain that, during his incarceration, he had actually chewed and swallowed every piece of paper on which he had written or received personal writing. To maintain such a diet, one must not produce many meals, and he knew he literally could not swallow what she was asking him to produce.

We saw many examples of similarly fierce and bizarre resistance to putting words down on paper, and we improvised our way toward solutions to such problems. For example, the professor mentioned in the case above held a discussion with the class on the loaded (for them) word "journal," on difficulties they had faced with personal correspondence, and on their suggestions for changing the assignment to make it less threatening.

We also had to educate ourselves in how deeply the tradition of "silencing" is ingrained in the American prison system. The notion of inmate silence was essential to both of the nineteenth-century models of prisons, the Auburn and the Philadelphia (Foucault 237). The main difference was that in the Auburn model the inmates worked and ate together but were not permitted to speak, while in the Philadelphia model inmates were silenced by solitary confinement (238). As late as 1940, one of the special features of Alcatraz was its "no talking" rule (Fuller 3). In such an atmosphere, written communication can be even more dangerous than oral communication because it leaves a record that can be interpreted and manipulated in whatever way the institution chooses. Guards may enter an inmate's cell at any hour of the day or night and perform a "shakedown," at which time anything can be confiscated, including paper.

If we were ignorant at first of the risks our students ran when they wrote, we were educated swiftly by the end of the first semester. In our English department, we often publish student writing, and the need of the first semester of the new prison program seemed like a good publication opportunity, so we circulated about 100 copies of a 22-page publication of writing from three classes—mostly half-page descriptions of the men's families, of simple processes, and of prison life.

The interest of the faculty and the pleasure of our students at the publication was rewarding. The shock came after Christmas vacation when we learned that several of our students had been called in and reprimanded for what they had written.

Among those reprimanded was George, my fifty-year-old basic writing student. George had struggled through the first half of the semester with a case of overgenerality and lack of development that finally dissipated when I suggested he write a plain, one-paragraph description of how to write a "kite" (a memo requesting something in prison). He wrote a well-organized, specific, and satiric paragraph titled "Kiting to See Your Social Worker." For writing this, he was threatened with being shipped out of that medium-security institution to a maximum-security institution.

In addition to the tradition of silence and the punishment for writing that is part of the prison system, there is a third difficulty for the inmate writer in a creative writing class, and that is the pain I referred to at the beginning of this piece. The student's physical pain from having to eat his writing dramatizes the psychological pain that writing can cause. Ethridge Knight, a convict who began writing poetry in prison and then went on to win the National Book Award for Poetry, has spoken most eloquently about that pain:

[W]hen one is involved in the creative process in prison, one is extremely aware of the pain and suffering of the outer environment (prison itself) and the inner world (one's view of himself). The prisoner seeks to avoid this pain and suffering—by escaping into sex novels, westerns television, bootleg booze and pills. (69)

Students may leave class with an invention exercise and return to the following class with a twenty-page account of a painful and long-repressed memory that the exercise forces them to come to terms with. Their writing sensitizes them to their surroundings, which even in a shiny-new minimum-security prison, can be painful, and which in the horrid depressing ugliness of many facilities, can be worse. Meanwhile, as Knight notes, there are many more opportunities to escape from pain than to create in spite of pain, and since creation is the alternative that is more loaded with danger and risk, it sometimes seems a wonder that anyone writes in prison at all.

The Urgency of Words

Despite all the factors that work against the student inmate's writing, there is a paradoxical urgency to write that is palpable in prison. Two

modern writers who have witnessed the urge are Jean-Paul Sartre and Vaclav Havel. Sartre encountered this urgency in "a little poacher" whom he met in prison. Although everyone in the prison knew the man's life story and "the Military Tribunal was able to confirm it. . . this wasn't enough—the man felt cheated. . . . He then invented the idea of writing it down in order to express it—in other words, to possess it in all its clarity and distinction, and at the same time to let the story take possession of him and so survive—with its author, frozen within it" (30).

Vaclav Havel noted a similar urge during his incarceration: "Almost every prisoner had a life story that was unique and moving. As I listened to these different accounts, I suddenly found myself in something like a 'pretotalitarian' world, or simply in a world of literature" (quoted in Davies 142). Sartre and Havel suggest two urgencies for creative writers in prison: self-control and self-expression, which are not mutually exclusive and often overlap.

Sartre used his fellow inmate as an example of what he believed was everyone's desire to write in order to make experience meaningful. Some of us who teach writing entertain doubts some days that anyone wants to write, but those who teach writing in prison recognize all students in Sartre's line of reasoning: "People everywhere wish their own life, with all its dark places that they sense to be an experience not only lived, but presented. They would like to see it disengaged from all the elements that crush it; and rendered essential by an expression that reduces what crushes them to inessential conditions of their persons" (30).

Prose is especially useful for responding to this urge. Sometimes we see a new student in prison who hands in his life story in addition to the first writing assignment, saying, "I know this wasn't the assignment, but I had to get this down first," or, "I'm sorry. I know this isn't what you wanted, but I couldn't stop. I've been writing this for three days." The "dark places" in those accounts may be childhood, crime scenes, prison, or all of those places and others, but the writer conveys a sense of relief in handing the work over, just at getting the account written for the first time.

Revision is also useful for responding to the urge Sartre describes. Sartre noted of his fellow prisoner's written account that "he wrote it badly. . . [the] initial desire to say everything results in everything being hidden" (30). Of course Sartre was not a writing teacher accustomed, as we are, to reading rough drafts and to pointing out and questioning the silences. As the stories are revised, the student may have to relive, or even live for the first time, the emotions of grief,

self-pride, or shame. At this stage of the process, I am often reminded of Yeats's lines:

The friends that have it I do wrong
Whenever I remake a song,
Should know what issue is at stake:
It is myself that I remake.

The prison fiction-writing class, then, is one where students are most free to pursue their personal agenda of getting down the past, and it is also the place where they can envision the future. Along with the literature class, it is the place where ethical issues are most hotly debated in the context of the stories we read and the stories the prisoners write. One political science teacher said that "[His] discussion of Marxism lasted ten minutes on campus and two weeks in the prison," and made me realize that while my discussion on ethics in fiction on campus lasts ten minutes, the issue of ethics in fiction at the prison is one raised and discussed by the students throughout the semester.

If writing fiction helps students gain control over their own experience, poetry-writing classes are often best for providing experience in self-expression, or as one inmate put it at the end of the first poetry-writing class: "When I first got in this class, I thought, 'Not me, not sissy poetry stuff. I'll drop during the drop period.' But then I was here, and I was expressing myself, and I liked it. I had never expressed myself before."

As a matter of fact, poetry and other types of creative writing often provide the liberating key between the difficulty and urgency of words. Terry Herrnsen, a poet who teaches composition and literature courses at the Ohio State University Marion campus, says, "I use poetry-reading and poetry-writing in my prison composition class because poetry releases the language into a composition class. In prison, where the men are so often betrayed by language, it is more crucial to help them find ways to release the language."

Urgency for the Creative Writing Teacher

The sheer interest expressed by inmates in writers and writing was a prime factor in the expansion of our creative writing program. We had many indications of the respect with which the inmates regarded writers, but the reaction to visiting writers was the most observable. Here are a few reactions of the inmates to one visiting poet's reading:

I don't know how she does it. If I had to express something like she does, I don't know what I'd do. . . . She really got into the

poetry, every single word. . . . She is the one that wrote them. I bet that takes a lot of time. And she teaches too. I don't know how she does it.

I thought she was a really great kinda person. She expressed what she felt and didn't care what others thought. . . . Poetry has a special meaning to me as it is self-expression.

I started to look at the faces of the people around me. I have never seen looks like that on inmates before. It was a country-boy-come-to-the-big-city-and-seeing-his-first-skyscraper look.

Richard Shelton, who ran a writing workshop in the Arizona prison system for years, describes two other urgencies for creative writing teachers in prison where they may find "a wealth of literary talent. They have also found that the act of writing creatively and the success and prestige which comes with publication can have a profound effect on the self-image and future behavior of the incarcerated" (*vii-viii*).

I requested to teach a poetry-writing class at the prison based on the talent I had witnessed as word got out that I was a poet and manuscripts came into my possession. By then, I was also motivated by seeing the change and growth which Shelton mentions in the writers I encountered there. The dramatic changes in skills, reasoning, appearance, and self-esteem were positive changes that all my colleagues witnessed, but we writing teachers had the additional incentive of watching "the guys" win many of the college's creative writing awards and national awards such as the PEN Prison Writers Award. They began publishing in little magazines, and one had a chapbook accepted for publication.

One of our most successful creative writers, when asked if he thought creative endeavors empowered inmates to change their lives, answered that success with creative writing helps to create self-esteem, which is a beginning. He continued, "I don't think it's just the writing or the art that does the empowering, but the overall educational process in conjunction with the creative effort—as well as that internal search for meaning and external search for harmony."

To illustrate some of the positive effects of creative writing on the program and the students, I would like to present two types of prison writers that Franklin names: the writer who becomes a prisoner and the prisoner who becomes a writer (243).

Emanuel: The Writer Who Became a Prisoner

Emanuel came into our program in his early thirties: already known as a poet, he placed out of the basic writing class into a literature class.

The teacher of the class, Lu Capra, assigned each student the task of producing a "creative response" to one of the works studied in the class. Among the paintings and jazz compositions in response to ten works studied, four students, including Emanuel, wrote in response to Gloria Naylor's *Women of Brewster Place*. He saw Brewster Place as a metaphor for the prison, and he concluded his poem with these lines: "Yet, though I've died a thousand deaths, I shall live to die a thousand more."

Capra mailed the four student responses to Gloria Naylor, who responded by volunteering to give a reading. To this day, I do not know who was more nervous the night of that reading: Naylor, who chain-smoked; the men, who stopped chain-smoking for once; or the teacher who had had the prison give and then rescind and then give permission for the author to enter several times the previous week. I do know that all the tension faded when the reading began with Naylor reading from the still hand-written copy of *Mama Day*:

Emanuel witnessed the power of words that night: Naylor's words, to be sure, but also the power of his own words which had connected with Naylor in New York and carried her to the vast wasteland of Ohio.

Rick: The Prisoner Who Became a Writer

Rick, in contrast, came to the writers workshop out of the remedial program. His writing teacher recognized that his writing, though mechanically flawed, revealed real talent, suggested he come to the creative writing workshop. One of his early pieces of writing, three pages of single-spaced rhymed quatrains, begins:

Our love began so innocently
so many years ago,
years of hopes and dreams and fears
let that loves light, brightly glow.

Perhaps evidence of his improvement since this poem is the note he attached to it when I recently asked him for a copy of his early work: "For you let me tear out these few hideous pages from my notebook of the damned" (Rimbaud). In addition to obtaining a bachelor's degree in four years, he also gained success as a creative writer, including the publication of a chapbook titled *Tearing through the Fence*. One of the poems in that book, "The Calling," was written to Emanuel as the two men were leaving the institution.

When I first read the poem, I was galvanized by the race and class issues it raised, especially in these lines:

... in the streets
where the white man's stick has beat it
into the stones, pounded it into our souls!
Yes, my friend, even mine.

As Franklin says, "Afro-American consciousness in prison reaches way out beyond the experience of Black prisoners. Even the term 'Black' sometimes comes to signify a class point of view" (260). The poem concludes with these three stanzas:

... Black Man, Brother, fellow keeper
of word, of deed, of spirit,
so few on either side possess the knowledge
reserved centuries for us:
the calling to arms;
the naming of things lacking names
in a world that would rather forget
about ashes and flames and the names
of all who've been martyred to them,
of all who die in them daily,
of all who'll never know...
Chant on, my friend, chant and revive
the music, the dance, the beat of the heart:
cast your spells for all to hear,
and sharpen your tears for those who won't.

In addition to coming to term with the race and class issues that prison represents, this poem celebrates writing itself, just as prison writing amplifies and focuses key issues of creative writing pedagogy in general, including the relation between power and writing; the tension between self-control and self-expression; and the interplay between writing as a mode of liberation and writing as a mode of endangerment.

Notes

1. Although these anthologies are too numerous to mention here and can best be found in Franklin's bibliography, the work of Joseph Bruchac is crucial to anyone who teaches English in prison, especially "Breaking Out 'With a Pen" and his anthology, *The Light from Another Country*.

I gratefully acknowledge the assistance of the editors Wendy Bishop and Hans Ostrom in the preparation of this manuscript. In addition, I thank three Findlay Colleagues: Rick Gebhardt, for administrative support; Lu

Capra, for generously sharing her experience in prison teaching; and Paul Beauvais, for leading me to Sartre. A special thanks to the students at Lima and Allen (Ohio) Correctional Institutions whose lives have inspired my work.

The earliest notes for this essay come from my presentation at the 1986 convention of the Conference on College Composition and Communication in New Orleans. A version of this essay was presented in a session sponsored by the Interpretation Division at the 1989 Speech Communication Association in San Francisco. I am grateful for the input of those two audiences.

References

- Bruchac, Joseph. "Breaking Out With the Pen: Poetry in American Prisons." *A Gift of Tongues: Critical Challenges in Contemporary American Poetry*. Ed. Marie Harris and Kathleen Agüero. Athens: U of Georgia P, 1987. 286-94.
- , ed. *The Light from Another Country: Poetry from American Prisons*. Greenfield Center, NY: The Greenfield Review P, 1984.
- Davies, Ioan. *Writers in Prison*. Cambridge, MA: Basil Blackwell, 1990.
- Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. New York: Random, 1979.
- Franklin, H. Bruce. *Prison Literature in America: The Victim As Criminal and Artist*. New York: Oxford UP, 1989.
- Knight, Ethridge. "Prison and the Creative Artist." *Indiana Writes: Writing from the Prisons* (1979): 69-71.
- Miller, Richard. *Tearing through the Fence*. Olean, NY: Split Personality, 1989.
- Sartre, Jean-Paul. "The Purposes of Writing." *Between Existentialism and Marxism*. New York: Pantheon, 1974. 9-32.
- Shelton, Richard. "Introduction." *The Light from Another Country*. Ed Joseph Bruchac. vi-xi.