

Reciprocity comes into it

an interview with James Koller
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Where do your poems come from? Can you explain their genesis?

My poems are a record of my experience on several levels. They are often built from images or bits of dialogue that have collected in my mind – a process, these bits seem to gather themselves with other fragments to finally express some complete “message.”

There are areas of my life, experiences that I feel are more meaningful than others in terms of poetry. Much of my poetry is concerned with the spiritual, as I experience and understand spiritual: the love that one feels for other living beings, the love given by others, the sensuality others elicit and I experience, the messages that the natural world elicits, the messages that come from dreams.

Confucius, as Ezra Pound translated him, said, “Things have roots and branches; affairs have scopes and beginnings. Know what precedes and what follows”. Pound himself wrote, “Nothing is without effective cause”. Those I’ve known who have died appear with regularity in my poems. They continue to live in both the poems and my mind. Even dead their lives evolve from my knowledge of them as living folk – life, like identity, as long as any vestige remains, continues to change as that life or identity is experienced by others.

What were your literary influences? How did you become a poet?

There is a story: before I knew anything about poetry, I once walked with my father on a beach. He pointed to a cabin and said, “This is the kind of a house a poet lives in”. I’ve often wondered what my father meant by the remark, but at that time I knew instantly

I wanted to live in this particular way, wanted to be a poet.

The man who sometimes lived in that cabin was Carl Sandburg. He was from the middle of America, Illinois, which is where I grew up. He was interested in folk music and had a socialist point of view. When I was ten or so, a substitute school teacher read one of his poems to us. It was about how fog moves into a place, on little cat feet, he said. I liked the poem, started to read poetry, especially Sandburg, and to write poetry.

My second major influence was Ezra Pound. I ran into his work in my teens, but saved it until I thought I could make sense of it. In my early twenties I read everything I could find that he had written, hunted down all the references he made that I could follow.

How much is your writing part of the Beat generation?

When the war was over in 1945 we all felt we had the freedom to move again, and I made my first long trip by car with my family in 1948. We lived in the big flat center of America. At seventeen, in 1953, I was already out on the road, driving across the US and Canada. I knew what it was like. In 1956, the summer before *On the road* was published, I was in California. I hung around *City Lights* bookstore and could feel something was going on, the energies there. When *On the road* was published it became clear that Kerouac was one of the keys to understanding all this energy. As I read it, I recognized the feeling, was ecstatic! I read the first hundred pages at one sitting, and then drove at 80 mph to share it instantly with a friend.

I was 22 in 1958, saw myself as part of the Beat movement as it emerged. I liked the poetry people like Philip Whalen, Paul Blackburn and Gregory Corso were writing, a poetry that I found open, took one into the streets, into the “now” of experience, wasn’t academic, but one that spoke a language I immediately understood.

Back in the middle West I started graduate school in Iowa. At one point in a literary criticism course we were asked to write a paper on a literary critic of our own choosing. I chose to write on Ezra Pound. When I handed the paper in, the teacher said nothing; when he gave papers back a week later, he returned papers to everyone but me. When I asked him where mine was, he only stared at me. I was enrolled in a writing course, and when I attempted to discuss one of my poems, the teacher responded, “I have no basis on which to criticize your poetry”. I thought, “Well there’s no basis for my being here”. I went on reading and writing poetry. I was also sending my poems around. *Evergreen Review* #2 featured the San Francisco scene so I sent poems to the review but they refused them. I kept trying. Finally, a former editor from the *Chicago Review* (Irving Rosenthal, who had edited a suppressed issue of the CR) joined the *Evergreen Review* staff. He liked my poems and offered to put me in contact with Donald Allen who was editing an anthology of Beat poetry. I moved to San Francisco in 1960, met Don Allen, and through him Philip Whalen and Richard Brautigan, before moving up to the Pacific Northwest.

Donald Allen and Philip Whalen ultimately introduced me to many others. I met Gary Snyder and Lew Welch about 1965.

In 1964, I was one of the founding editors of *Coyote’s Journal* in Oregon. Many of



Photo: Maggie Koller

the Beats were published in its pages. (It was published regularly at first, then infrequently... But Coyote never dies!)

Nature inspires you a lot. Do animals like hawks, crows and wolves have a particular significance to you?

All the animals and birds are important to one watching, yet some make a bolder statement, because they know their place in the food chain and can allow themselves to be more apparent. I particularly identify with magpies and crows (who are the messengers between worlds in the ghost dance) and coyotes (who are audacious tricksters, great teachers of cause and effect). My connection to the wolf comes from studying the literature of their behavior, from having raised Alaskan Malamutes, who share many characteristics with wolves.

All animals have power; it is the power that I see. Birds are like rosaries, link with natural power, with natural spirits. They are also fellow travellers. When I look at another animal's eyes, I find we are the same, they have the same problems as we're having, often more. Even insects... Once I was walking into a room and saw an ant walking too but it suddenly stopped on seeing me, such a big monster, then it zoomed past me as I waited for it to make its move. Clearly insects can relate noises from those passing to knowing to stay out of the way.

Trees too have a sense, react, turn and relate to heat and cold. We often forget that the tree is part of a forest, that the forest itself has a relationship with other living forms and the energies that affect it.

I have a symbiotic sense of nature. Reciprocity comes into it. Everything is interconnected. We allow ourselves to think that we can function in nature. But the whole ability to be thankful for our food, to know who died to feed us, what contributes to our life, is not thoroughly understood by most western people. On the same level, I can identify myself with the animals, the life I see when I go into the woods. I am not different, I am part of the whole.

What are the connections in your thinking between sensuality (and your relationships with women) and the greater natural world – i.e. does the relationship between the physical and psychological life one experiences inside approximate in any way the physical and psychological life outside, especially in an intimate way?

Inside and outside are much the same. The direction my experience has taken, as well as the particulars of what I've experienced, seems in large part a result of my combined senses. I understand the world to be a physical place and that one's experience is limited by or to one's senses, to the experiences one can realize via one's senses and/or to an understanding of those experiences consistent with the capability of those senses. The physical world is never still, is ever ready to stimulate in some manner. An openness to stimulus determines, makes possible, what happens. I have a strong sense of cause and effect, which seems to work in tandem with my senses. Certainly being able to engage my senses in keeping with what I understand as cause and effect enables me to respond in an appropriate manner. I think my relationships with others, especially women, are what they are because they began with my senses, went on to initiate my understanding of cause and effect, and ultimately drew on my judgement. The same factors operate in those of my actions that are concerned with physical reality overall and my experience of the response or effect those actions generate. (In a sensual relationship one opens to possibilities, allows reciprocal exchange and growth. In the natural worlds an openness in exchange effects much the same. The notion that one need take charge, order the world, is most often counter to natural order.) Sensuality in our contemporary world is often thought of in terms of sexual behaviour. Sexual practice in most social groups is limited by the group's social mores and imposed law and punishment. It is also limited by a lack of imagination. The effect all this has on one's ability to experience the world as it is, is devastating.

Can you say more about Coyote or the Trickster figure? Why is it important in your poetry?

I believe one thing always causes another, in an ecological sense. We can call that reciprocity. The Trickster figure, in folk and indigenous stories, very often is the agent of reciprocity. He is the prime mover, provokes questions and discomfort, sometimes in a positive, sometimes in a negative way. Coyote always has a purpose. He changes his shape and he wants to create something by this change that wouldn't have happened otherwise.

How much is cause and effect part of your work?

Cause and effect occupies a major place in my thinking. My read of the world happens from my understanding of what Pound called "an effective cause". No one has the power to anticipate all the effects of an act. Some seemingly insignificant things actually make more sense when considered in terms of what they effect. I react to stimuli, they create an effect on me; for instance, my being on the road triggers recollections, the cars passing by create the story. It all adds up.

One of my favourite memories comes from when I was a kid. We were driving around Texas and we came onto an old car by the side of the road. In that time, you always stopped, in case someone was in need. There was an old man in this car with a fighting cock pacing on the top of the seat next to him! My father asked, "Is there something we can do for you?" The man just replied "No, I'm fine". There he was on the side of the road, taking in the world with a fighting cock. We had worried the man had a problem, in that situation, in such a landscape, but we were wrong, not him! We obviously didn't have all the information. Everything is the effect of some cause, even if, at first, you can't see the link.

To what degree is shamanic ecstasy an acknowledged part of your poetics, especially in terms of giving shape to the shapeless, i.e. in the sensual determination of realities? Or, in terms of what might be considered rite, where you speak with the dead, i.e. in some fashion "killing death"?

While the word *shamanism* has all sorts of new age connotations now, the original reference is to those chosen individual members of native groups who were able to move freely across physical/spiritual borders in a manipulative manner to effect desired ends. In our western cultures the word *ecstasy* is linked with drugs, sex and religion. For me *shamanic ecstasy* is a form of religious ecstasy, i.e. a state where one is possessed by spirits other than one's own, who make themselves known to witnesses. Generally speaking I'm not possessed. I sometimes witness or experience single acts that in themselves connote no complete message, but are obviously of import, which when associated with other such acts do effect a message. Writing that comes to pass from such acts is never forced, but flowers once the message is complete and I become aware that it is complete.

Some of my writing originates with dream. I understand that these dreams arrive from a sense field that I don't generally inhabit in a waking state. Usually the dreams arrive or are remembered as complete, say what they say in a complete fashion. The writing that comes from them tries to pass on the same experience or information. In my waking state, when writing from my dream mind, what comes to the rational surface is past rather than present, sometimes previously unacknowledged experience. I find as I become older that my thoughts are often interrupted by seemingly irrelevant recollections which when examined can be found to connect – thus, the connections are not at the time willed, but come because my mind is trying to enlarge upon an existing pattern.

I don't differentiate between the experiences of physical reality and dream mind in my writing – they do all create my reality, which is what I'm expressing.

Do you employ sound to achieve any particular end?

The sound patterns I use are generally enhanced natural speech patterns – enhanced in that they are recognized and added to, or eliminated, to effect what it is that the work seems to “want to say”. Some of my poems are conscious efforts to effect ends. These poems evidence a determined and sustained focus, function much as thinking about someone intensively often does, by bringing response. These poems are directly and consciously related to shamanic acts. Repeated words and phrases, and words that sound like the thing spoken of, in patterns of sound and silence sometimes find their own way into these poems, creating a music which differs from my normal cadence. When performing with a musician the poems take on still another reality, often a result of counterpoint. I am very interested in folk music and many of my poems can be sung or at least musically spoken.

Considering the idea that poetry is work on a particular language, how do you explain your use of foreign languages in your poetry, namely, French and Italian?

In the late 80s and early 90s I spent half time in Ticino, making frequent trips to Italy and France, and believe I started to use the languages I heard around me. There is in North America a Latino poetry which moves back and forth between Spanish and English – a poetry that I much enjoy. I have in the past (when I lived in the western US) used Spanish in my poems. I love the fact that Hispanic Americans use the two languages everyday, I’d love to be able to do it. Sometimes, as in “She saw the wolf”, I play on double meaning and idiomatic phrases. I like ambiguity and playful meaning. I use other languages for their music too.

The road, or travel, figures largely at times in your writing. Is this a conscious metaphor or device, and if so to what ends?

The road and travel have indeed figured largely in my life. I was born and raised in the center of the US, a land of farms and plains,

and the roads that intersected and connected it all. I was on these roads early on and have been on them a good bit of my life. For fifty years I’ve driven back and forth across North America, visiting and revisiting most of the US and southern Canada. Besides Maine, where I live now, I’ve lived in New York, Illinois, Iowa, Colorado, Washington, Oregon, California, New Mexico.

I have used the road as a device in my writing, to connect thoughts, but generally when the road appears in my work it is there because it contributes itself to the experience I’m expressing. Many of my poems evolved from experiences on the road. Many were also actually written on the road.

How do you deal with the tension between the fact that poetry comes from personal experience and the fact that once published, the same poems belong to the public sphere, to readers who do not know your personal life?

My senses are how the world comes to me. I write from what my senses stir up. When I look at a flower, I see a beautiful thing and the same occurs with a beautiful woman. I’m not ashamed to explore any of it. Sometimes I have a sense of where the poem will go, who will read it, sometimes not. Because I have some idea of what certain groups of people will find of interest, or find problematic, I’m able to stay polite as necessary. (I didn’t understand all these lines when I was younger!) Generally speaking, I have no didactic purpose in my poetry, in other writings, but not in poetry. Poetry cannot be the same to all of us. Readers take what they can take. You can’t know everything. It is not all rational, it can’t be all rational.

As I read old poems years after they were written, I sometimes think “why did I write that?” Some belong to the past. Some were true at the time they were written, but as I read them now, even if I can still relate to them, find they correspond to past feelings and experience. Other poems do not belong to a particular period of time, stay true. One continues to re-interpret and re-experience.

You quote Bill Brown in one poem: “Poetry is too personal”.

Do you agree with this statement?

I suppose poetry can be too personal – but as a poet, I feel I have the license to make people feel uncomfortable. I try to be in full control of my writing, to let the poems say as much as they want to say.

Do you expect anything from your readers?

I want them to be there, to be willing to open up to the poems. If I’m afraid they might not be open, I try to structure an appropriate grouping of poems, to effect that end. Much as a curator in a museum arranges for desired effect. A heavy poem is often followed by a lighter. Usually I try to finish a book on a lighter tone, as I do in *Snows Gone By*, even if the last poem relates as it does the feeling of being stuck, not knowing what to do. There is an escape: “have a bite to eat” and “forget the whole damn thing”.. When I read to kids for instance, I usually know what they’re going to like, can give them that.

What is the connection, the common link, between all the poems of *Snows Gone By*?

The major link, simply put, is that they are my work, written over a long period, and were not collected before. The book is consistent on some levels; for instance, humour runs through the collection. But as I say in my preface, “there is little need for consistency”. On a broad level, the book represents me as no other of my books has – includes bits and pieces that it seemed at earlier times best to leave out. However inconsistent, I am who I am.

A final question:

What can you tell about your involvement among the Italian bioregionalists?

The bioregional network in Italy is a loose network of people who are centered in the places they live, who try to live locally, in simple ways, close to nature and generally hold a range of varied beliefs much like those of what was in America once called *the alternative society*. I’m known as a poet, have read

in many schools, in natural preserves of many kinds, and at gatherings. The idea is that my poems have something to say that these folks can understand. For me, it is great to have found people who keep those fires burning.