

Song, Poetry and Language—Expression and Perception

by

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A Statement on Poetics and Language

My father is a small man, in fact, almost tiny. I think it must be the way that the Pueblo people were built when they lived at Mesa Verde and Pueblo Bonito. That's a long time ago, around 800-1200 A.D. One thousand years ago—this man? He's very wiry, and his actions are wiry. Smooth, almost tight motions, but like currents in creek water or an oak branch in a mild mountain wind. His face is even formed like that. Rivulets from the sides of his forehead, squints of his eyes, down his angular face and under his jaw. He usually wears a dark blue wool cap. His hair is turning a bit gray, but it's still mostly black, the color of distant lava cliffs. He wears glasses sometimes if he's reading or looking closely at the grain swirls of wood he is working with.

My father carves, dancers usually. What he does is find the motion of Deer, Buffalo, Eagle dancing in the form and substance of wood. Cottonwood, pine, aspen, juniper which has the gentle strains of mild chertreuse in its central grains—and his sinewed hands touch the wood very surely and carefully, searching and knowing. He has been a welder for the ATSFY railroad and is a good carpenter, and he sits down to work at a table which has an orderly clutter of carving tools, paints, an ashtray, transistor radio, and a couple of Reader's Digests.

His movements are very deliberate. He holds the Buffalo Dancer in the piece of cottonwood poised on the edge of his knee, and he traces—almost carresses—the motion of the Dancer's crook of the right elbow, the way it is held just below midchest, and flicks a cut with the razor-edged carving knife. And he does it again. I know exactly how it is at that point in a Buffalo Dance Song, the motion of elbow, arm, body and mind.

He clears his throat a bit and he sings, and the song comes from that motion of his carving, his sitting, the sinews in his hands and face and the song itself. His voice is full-toned and wealthy, all the variety and nuance of motion in the sounds and phrases of the words are active in it; there is just a bit of tremble from his thin chest.

I listen.

*"Stah wah maiyanih, Muukai-tra Shahyaika,
duuwahsteh duumahsthee Dyahnle guhyoutseh mah-ah.
Wahyuuhunah wahyuuhuu huu nai ah."*

Recently, I was talking with a friend who is enrolled in a Navajo language course. She is Navajo, but she does not know how to speak Navajo. That is the story at present with quite a number of Indian young people who use English as the language with which they express themselves. English is the main language in which they experience the meaning and the uses of language.

She made a comment about not being able easily to learn Navajo as a course of instruction. She said, "I can't seem to hear the parts of it," referring to inflections and nuances of spoken sentences and words.

I referred to a remark I made sometime before. "The way that language is spoken at home—Acu, the tribal people and community from whom I come—is with a sense of completeness. That is, when a word is spoken, it is spoken as a complete word. There are no separate parts or elements to it." And I meant that a word is not spoken in any *separate parts*, that is, with reference to linguistic structure, technique of diction, nuance of sound, tonal quality, inflection, etc. Words are spoken as complete words.

For example, when my father has said a word—in speech or in song—and I ask him, "What does that word break down to? I mean breaking it down to the syllables of sound or phrases of sound, what do each of these parts mean?" And he has looked at me with exasperated—slightly pained—expression on his face, wondering what I mean. And he tells me, "It doesn't break down into anything."

For him, the word does not break down into any of the separate elements that I expect. The word he has said is complete.

The word is there, complete in its entity of meaning and

usage. But I, with my years of formal American education and some linguistic training, having learned and experienced English as a language—having learned to recognize the parts of a sentence, speech, the etymology of words, that words are separable into letters and sounds and syllables of vowels and consonants—I have learned to be aware that a word does break down into basic parts or elements. Like that Navajo friend who is taking the Navajo language course, I have on occasion come to expect—even demand—that I hear and perceive the separated elements of Indian spoken words.

But, as my father has said, a word does not break down into separate elements. A word is complete.

In the same way, a song really does not break down into separate elements. In the minds and views of the people singing it at my home or in a Navajo religious ceremony, for whatever purpose that a song is meant and used, whether it be for prayer, a dancing event, or as part of a story, the song does not break down. It is part of the complete voice of a person.

Language, when it is regarded not only as expression but is realized as experience as well, works in and is of that manner. Language is perception of experience as well as expression.

Technically, language can be disassembled according to linguistic function which mainly deals with the expression part of it. You can derive—subsequently define—how a language is formed, how and for what purpose it is used, and its development in a context. But when the totality is considered, language as experience and expression, it doesn't break down so easily and conveniently. And there is no need to break it down and define its parts.

Language as expression and perception—that is at the core of what a song is. It relates to how my father teaches and sings a song and how a poet teaches and speaks a poem.

There is a steel vise at one end of the table my father works at. He clamps a handlong piece of wood in it. This pine is the torso of an Eagle Dancer. The Dancer is slim and his chest is kind of concave. The eagle is about to fly aloft, and my father files a bit of the hard upper belly with a rasp. Later, he will paint the dancing Eagle man who has emerged out of the wood.

My father built the small house in which we sit. The sandstone was quarried near Shuutuh Tasigaiyamishrouh, on the

plateau uplift south of here, towards Acu. This is his workshop. It has a couple of windows and a handmade door because he couldn't find the right size door at the lumberyard in Grants where he trades. The single room is very secure and warm when he has a fire built on cold days in the woodstove which is one of those that looks like a low-slung hog.

There are a couple of chairs on which we sit and the table with his work and a bed in a corner. There is a stack of shelves against the eastern wall. My mother stores her pottery there. The pottery is covered with some cloth which formerly used to sack flour. I think there is a box of carpentry tools on the floor below the lowest shelf. Against another wall is a book case which doesn't hold books. Mainly there are pieces of wood that my father is carving—some he started and didn't feel right about or had broken and he has laid aside—and a couple of sheep vertebra he said he is going to make into bolo ties but hasn't gotten around to yet. And a couple of small boxes, one of them a shoebox, and the other a homemade one of thin plywood in which are contained the items he uses for his duties as a cacique.

He is one of the elders of the Antelope people who are in charge of all the spiritual practice and philosophy of our people, the Acumeh. He and his uncles are responsible that things continue in the manner that they have since time began for us, and in this sense he is indeed a 1,000 year old man. In the box are the necessary items which go with prayer: the feathers, pollen, precious bits of stone and shell, cotton string, earth paints, cornmeal, tobacco, other things. The feathers of various birds are wrapped in several years ago newspaper to keep the feathers smoothed. It is his duty to insure that the prayer songs of the many and various religious ceremonies survive and continue.

My father sings, and I listen.

Song at the very beginning was experience. There was no division between experience and expression. Even now, I don't think there is much of a division except arbitrary. Take a child, for example, when he makes a song at his play, especially when he is alone. In his song, he tells about the experience of the sensations he is feeling at the moment with his body and mind. And the song comes about as words and sounds—

expression. But essentially, in those moments, that song that he is singing is what he is experiencing. The child's song is both perception of that experience and his expression of it.

The meaning that comes from the song as expression and perception comes out of and is what the song is.

*"Stah wah maiyanih, Muukai-ira Shahyaika,
duumahsteh duumahsthee Dyahnle guhyoutseh mah-ah.
Wahyuuhunah wahyuuhuu huu nai ah."*

This is a hunting song which occurs to me because it is around deer hunting season. I look around the countryside here, the pinon and the mountains nearby, and feel that I might go hunting soon, in November. The meaning the song has for me is in the context of what I am thinking, of what I want and perhaps will do. The words are translatable into English and they are,

My helping guide, Mountain Lion Hunting Spirit Friend,
in this direction, to this point bring the Deer to me.

Wahyuuhunah wahyuuhuu huu nai ah.

The latter part of the song is a chanted phrase that is included with all hunting songs. The meaning—the song for the hunt, asking for guidance and help—is conveyed in English as well. There is no problem in deciphering the original meaning, and I don't think there ever really is when a song is taken to be both expression and perception.

The meaning that it has for me is that I recognize myself as a person in an active relationship—the hunting act—with Mountain Lion, the spirit friend and guide, and Deer. It is a prayer. A prayer song. The meaning that it has, further, is that things will return unto me if I do things well in a manner that is possible, if I use myself and whatever power I have appropriately. The purpose of the song is first of all to do things well, the way that they're supposed to be done, part of it being the singing and performing of the song, and that I receive, again well and properly, the things that are meant to be returned unto me. I express myself as well as realize the experience.

There is also something in a song that is actually substantial. When you talk or sing with words that are just words—or seem to be mere words—you sometimes feel that they are too ethereal, even fleeting. But when you realize the significance of what something means to you, then they are

very tangible. You value the meaning of the song for its motion in the dance and the expression and perception it allows you. You realize its inherent quality by the feeling that a song gives you. You become aware of the quietness that comes upon you when you sing or hear a song of quiet quality. You not only feel it—you know. The substance is emotional, but beyond that, spiritual, and it's real and you are present in and part of it. The act of the song which you are experiencing is real, and the reality is its substance.

A song is made substantial by its context—that is its reality, both that which is there and what is brought about by the song. The context in which the song is sung or that a prayer song makes possible is what makes a song substantial, gives it that quality of realness. The emotional, cultural, spiritual context in which we thrive—in that, the song is meaningful. The context has to do not only with your being physically present, but it has to do also with the context of the mind, how receptive it is and that usually means familiarity with the culture in which the song is sung.

The context of a song can be anything or can focus through a specific event or act but it includes all things. This is very important to realize when you are trying to understand and learn more than just the words or the technical facility of words in a song or poem. That means that one has to recognize that language is more than just a group of words and more than just the technical relationship between sounds and words. Language is more than just a functional mechanism. It is a spiritual energy that is available to all. It includes all of us and is not exclusively in the power of human beings—we are part of that power as human beings.

Oftentimes, I think we become convinced of the efficiency of our use of language. We begin to regard language too casually, thereby taking it for granted, and we forget the sacredness of it. Losing this regard, we become quite careless with how we use and perceive with language. We forget that language beyond the mechanics of it is a spiritual force.

When you regard the sacred nature of language, then you realize that you are part of it and it is part of you, and you are not necessarily in control of it, and that if you do control some of it, it is not in your exclusive control. Upon this realization, I think there are all possibilities of expression and perception which become available.

This morning my father said to my mother and me, "On Saturday, I am going to go hunting. I am telling you now. I will begin to work on Tuesday for it." He means that he will begin preparations for it. He explained that my brother-in-law will come for him on Friday, and they are going to hunt in Arizona. This is part of it, I know, the proper explanation of intention and purpose. I have heard him say that since I was a boy.

The preparations are always done with a sense of excitement and enjoyment. Stories are remembered.

Page was a good storyteller. I don't know why he was called Page—I suppose there is a story behind his name but I don't know it. Page was getting older when this happened. He couldn't see very well anymore, but he was taken along with a group of other hunters. "I was to be the kuusteenhruu," he said. The camp cook sticks around the camp, sings songs and makes prayers for the men out hunting, and waits, and fixes the food. Page got tired of doing that. He said, "I decided that it wouldn't hurt if I just went out of camp a little ways. I was sort of getting tired of sticking around. And so I did; I wasn't that blind."

He walked a ways out of their camp, you know, looking around, searching the ground for tracks. And he found some, great big ones. He said, "It must be my good fortune that I am to get a big one. I guess I'm living right," and he reached into his corfood bag and got some meal and sprinkled it with some precious stones and beads and pollen into the big tracks. He said, "Thank you for leaving your tracks, and now I ask you to wait for me, I am right behind you." And putting his mind in order, he followed the tracks, looking up once in a while to see if the large deer he could already see in his mind was up ahead.

"I was sure in a good mood," Page said, and he would smile real big. "Every once in a while I sprinkled corfood and precious things in the tracks. They were big," he said and he would hold out his large hand to show you how big, "and I would sing under my breath." He followed along, kind of slow you know because he was an old man and because of his eyes, until he came down this slope that wasn't too steep. There was an oak brush thicket at the bottom of it. He put his fingers upon the tracks to let it know that he was right behind, and the tracks felt very warm.

He said, "Ah haiee, there you will be in the thicket. There is where we will meet," and he prayed one more time and concluded his song and set his mind right and checked to make sure his gun was ready—I don't know what kind of rifle he had but it was probably an old one too. And he made his way to the thicket very carefully, very quietly, slightly bent down to see under the branches of the oak. And then he heard it moving around in the thicket, and he said quietly, "Ah haiee, I can hear that you're a big one. Come to me now, it is time, and I think we are both ready," just to make sure that his spirit was exactly right. And he crouched down to look and there it was some yards into the thicket and he put his rifle to his shoulder and searched for a vital spot, and then it turned to him and it was a pig.

"Kohjeeno!" Page said, his breath exhaling. He lowered his rifle, cussed a bit, and then he raised his rifle and said, "Kohjeeno, I guess you'll have to be my kquuyaitih today," and shot the pig. He cut the pig's throat to let the blood and then on the way back to camp he tried to find all the precious stones he had dropped in the tracks of the pig.

After that, until he went back North—passed away—his nephews and grandsons would say to him, "Uncle, tell us about the time the kohjeeno was your kquuyaitih." And Page would frown indignant a bit, and then he would smile and say, "Keehamaa dzee, we went hunting to Brushy Mountain . . ."

The song is basic to all vocal expression. The song as expression is an opening from inside of yourself to outside and from outside of yourself to inside but not in the sense that there are separate states of yourself. Instead, it is a joining and an opening together. Song is the experience of that opening or road if you prefer, and there are no separation of parts, no division between that within you and that without you as there is no division between expression and perception.

I think that is what has oftentimes happened with our use of English. We think of English as a very definitive language, useful in defining things—which means setting limits. But that's not supposed to be what language is. Language is not definition; language is all-expansive. We, thinking ourselves capable of the task, assign rules and roles to language unnecessarily. Therefore we limit our words, our language,

and we limit our perception, our understanding, our knowledge.

Children don't limit their words until they learn how, until they're told that it's better if they use definitive words. This is what happens to most everyone in a formal educational situation. Education defines you. It makes you see with and within very definite limits. Unless you teach and learn language in such a way as to permit it to remain or for it to become all-expansive—and truly visionary—your expressiveness and perceptions will be limited and even divided.

My father teaches that the song is part of the way you're supposed to recognize everything, that the singing of it is a way of recognizing this all-inclusiveness because it is a way of expressing yourself and perceiving. It is basically a way to understand and appreciate your relationship to all things. The song as language is a way of touching. This is the way that my father attempts to teach a song, and I try to listen, feel, know, and learn that way.

When my father sings a song, he tries to instill a sense of awareness about us. Although he may remark upon the progressive steps in a song, he does not separate the steps or components of the song. The completeness of the song is the important thing, how a person comes to know and appreciate it, not to especially mark the separate parts of it but to know the whole experience of the song.

He may mention that a particular song was sung sometime before or had been made for a special occasion but he remembers only in reference to the overall meaning and purpose. It may be an old, old song that he doesn't know the history of or it may be one he has made himself. He makes me aware of these things because it is important, not only for the song itself, but because it is coming from the core of who my father is and he is talking about how it is for him in relationship with all things. I am especially aware of its part in our lives and that all these things are a part of that song's life. And when he sings the song, I am aware that it comes from not only his expression but from his perception as well.

I listen carefully, but I listen for more than just the sound, listen for more than just the words and phrases, for more than the various parts of the song. I try to perceive the context, meaning, purpose—all of these items not in their separate parts but as a whole—and I think it comes completely like that.

A song, a poem becomes real in that manner. You learn its completeness; you learn the various parts of it but not as separate parts. You learn a song in the way that you are supposed to learn a language, as expression and as experience.

I think it is possible to teach song and poetry in a classroom so that language is a real way of teaching and learning. The effort will have to be with conveying the importance and significance of not only the words and sounds but the realness of the song in terms of oneself, context, the particular language used, community, the totality of what is around. More complete expression and perception will be possible then.

Yesterday morning, my father went over to Diabuukaiyah to get oak limbs for the Haadramahni—the Prayer Sticks. After he got back he said, “The Haadramahni for hunting are all of hardwoods, like the hahpaani.” The oak grows up the canyons which come out of the lava rock of Horace Mesa.

And at his worktable, he shows me. “This is a Haitsee—a Shield if you want to call it that—and it is used as a Guide.” It is a thin, splittled strip of hahpaani made into a circle which will fit into the palm of your hand. “There is a star in the center—I will make it out of string tied to the edges of the circle. This is a guide to find your way, to know directions by. It is round because the moon is round. It is the night sky which is a circle all around in which the stars and moon sit. It’s a circle, that’s why. This is part of it, to know the directions you are going, to know where you are at.”

He shows me a stick about the thickness of his thumb. The stick is an oak limb split in half, and he runs the edge of his thumbnail along the core of the wood, the dark streak at the very center of the wood. The streak does not run completely straight, but it flows very definitely from one end to the other. And my father says, “This is the Heeyahmani. This is to return you safely. This is so you will know the points on your return back, the straight and safe way. So you will be definite and true on your return course. It is placed at the beginning point of your journey. This line here is that, a true road.”

And then he explains, “I haven’t gotten this other stick formed yet, and it is of oak also. It is pointed on both ends, and it is

stout, strong.” He holds up his right hand, his fingers clutched around the stout oak limb. “It’s for strength and courage, manliness. So that in any danger you will be able to overcome the danger. So that you will have the stamina to endure hardship. It is to allow you to know and realize yourself as a man. It is necessary to have also.”

He tells me these things, and I listen. He says, “Later, we will sing some songs for the hunt. There is a lot to it, not just a few. There are any numbers of prayer. There are all those things you have to do in preparation, before you begin to hunt, and they are all meant to be done not only because they have been done in the past but because they are the way that things, good things, will come about for you. That is the way that you will truly prepare yourself, to be able to go out and find the deer, so that the deer will find you. You do those things in the proper way so that you will know the way things are, what’s out there, what you must think in approaching them, how you must respond—all those things. They are all part of it—you just don’t go and hunt. A person has to be aware of what is around him, and in this way, the preparation, these things that I have here, you will know.”

My father tells me, “This song is a hunting song, listen.” He sings and I listen. He may sing it again, and I hear it again. The feeling that I perceive is not only contained in the words but there is something surrounding those words, surrounding the song, and it includes us. It is the relationship that we share with each other and with everything else. And that’s the feeling that makes the song real and meaningful and which makes his singing and my listening more than just a teaching and learning situation.

It is that experience—that perception of it—that I mention at the very beginning which makes it meaningful. You perceive by expressing yourself therefore. This is the way that my father teaches a song. And this is the way I try to learn a song. This is the way I try to teach poetry, and this is the way I try to have people learn from me.

One time my father was singing a song, and this is the instance in which this—perception by/expression of—became very apparent for me. He was singing this song, and I didn’t catch the words offhand. I asked him, and he explained, “This song, I really like it for this old man.” And he said, “This

old man used to like to sing, and he danced like this," motioning like the old man's hands, arms, shoulders, and he repeated, "This song, I really like it for this old man."

That's what the song was about, I realized. It was both his explanation and the meaning of the song. It was about this old man who danced that way with whom my father had shared a good feeling. My father had liked the old man, who was probably a mentor of some sort, and in my father's mind during the process of making the song and when he sang it subsequent times afterwards, he was reaffirming the affection he had for the old guy, the way "he danced like this."

My father was expressing to me the experience of that affection, the perceptions of the feelings he had. Indeed, the song was the road from outside of himself to inside—which is perception—and from inside of himself to outside—which is expression. That's the process and the product of the song, the experience and the vision that a song gives you.

The words, the language of my experience, come from how I understand, how I relate to the world around me, and how I know language as perception. That language allows me vision to see with and by which to know myself.