

Matt W. Miller

The Imagination and Its Inventions: An Interview with Gregory Pardlo

MILLER:

Congratulations on the new book and all your continued success. *Spectral Evidence* is a powerful and rewarding read. Before we dive into it, I feel as if I have to ask, what kind of pressure does something like winning the Pulitzer Prize put on you? Do you feel a difference in expectations from yourself or from your readers that might affect or infect the work at all? Was writing *Air Traffic*, your memoir in essays, a way to sidestep any of those pressures or pitfalls by writing through a different form and style?

PARDLO:

Keep in mind, more than two years had passed after I finished writing *Digest* and it was picked up by Four Way Books. Another two years before it finally reached readers in 2014. *Air Traffic* was a book that I'd wanted to write since I was an undergrad. In fact, I entered a nonfiction MFA program that would give me the structure and support to write this essay collection which I had been invested in for so long. I was well into writing those essays when *Digest* won the Pulitzer in 2015, and when that happened, my mentor Phillip Lopate kept me grounded and reminded me that significant disruptions happen in every writer's life. When my father died in 2016, for example, I had to find a way to keep writing. That's not the same thing, I know—persevering through grief is not the same as feeling indebted to a reader who has awarded you a life-changing

prize—but I try to remind myself that the “reader,” in this sense, like grief, is a projection of my inner voice. Prize or no prize, richer or poorer, in sickness or health, I have to contend with that voice. I guess the short answer to your question is “No,” because the weight of expectations is always heavy on me.

MILLER:

In the prologue of the new collection, you explain that “spectral evidence” is testimony based on bad dreams or memories where subconscious fears and biases become objective facts that can be used in court. You make a connection between the victims of the Salem Witch trials and the institutional and cultural prejudices that haunt cases like the shooting of Michael Brown, writing that “This book is about the legal means by which fear is used to rationalize the persecution of people imagined to be in league with and possessed of supernatural forces . . . the same logic used to rationalize the prosecution of witches is the same logic that rationalizes vigilantism and police street justice.” Could you say more about how you came to make this connection and how you see it functioning in the book?

PARDLO:

The poems in the book tend to ask what are the ways collective illusion both enables and undermines society. I began by asking myself what I always ask my students: why has this, more than any other potentially compelling question, captured my imagination? I have had more than a few interactions with police whose ability to behave rationally had been short-circuited by, I suppose, some combination of racism, fear, and rage (which are pretty similar in my book). Some would say it was because

of “the color of my skin,” but this is just a polite way to avoid blaming the person who has attached unaccountable meaning to my skin. The more stories I’d hear about police shooting a Black man out of fear and rage, noting that they routinely testified that fearing for their lives was all the justification they needed for using lethal force, the more I understood our legal system as an institution that can be misused to rationalize racist illusions.

Years ago, ten or so, my daughter’s Upper East Side private school organized a kids and dads outing to a ballgame in the city. This was a daring safari for some families that rarely interacted with the lumpen public. As we were all standing in line to enter the stadium, one of the other dads struck up a conversation with some police officers stationed nearby. Such friendly banter they exchanged! It was shocking.

In my experience, the most casual interaction one could have with a cop is a brisk pat-down. A procedural catch-and-release if you’re lucky. It may go without saying, but I was the only Black dad and the only Brooklynite in the group. It should go without saying that the background of the police officers makes no difference. I tried my best not to let the lovefest upset me, but seeing that pleasant, wholesome display was like witnessing a betrayal firsthand. At home, I found myself getting really worked up about the way chronic problems like over-aggressive policing and mass shootings get written off as unfortunate side-effects in the protection of our freedoms when, as my experience at the ballgame assured my common sense, there are parts of American life where these problems are alien and other parts where these problems are a choice. To make sense of this selective behavior, I started looking for times in history when the institutions meant to protect people were organized around different choices and different fears.

For centuries, Europeans used sophisticated means to criminalize people who inspired fear. We look back on that today and shake our heads in disbelief. How absurd! How

sadly unjust! But, of course, we do this, have been doing this, all along. This is where I got the idea for the book. In one sense, there are collective illusions like witchcraft and race that are so thoroughly shared that they become an unquestioned “truth.” But there’s this other end of the spectrum where we willingly and knowingly enable the hoax. This spectrum fascinates me. It’s not a fancy idea, but it seemed to me a solid enough frame of reference to explore. I was really fortunate to have been granted a Cullman Fellowship at the New York Public Library to research the book. Funnily, when I started researching, I had no idea there was such a thing as spectral evidence. I stumbled onto the term. It wasn’t long until I realized that this was the name for all of my vague notions and intuitions. “Spectral evidence” was the name for the spectrum.

MILLER:

In the opening poem, “Exordium,” which begins the series “The Essay on Faith,” you write, “But stay memory / time’s plagiarist” and that a poem is a “spare tire for memory.” Do you think this idea haunts the book and the subject, that memory is a kind of thief of the past or at best just something that will let you roll slowly to some safe exit off the interstate?

PARDLO:

Yes! Of course, it hadn’t occurred to me to extend the metaphor in that way, but I think you nailed it. An exordium is the introduction to a classical essay, but it is also the opening statement of a last will and testament. It’s the beginning of the end. This reminded me that the lyric poem is a kind of elegy (although elegies are not necessarily lyric poems). The lyric poem attempts to inhabit a bit of memory with such clarity and force of mind that it suspends the

reader within that moment. The lyric poem is a tiny house of eternity, the cosmic light of a long-dead star. Memory and the lyric poem are in cahoots, trying to outrun the law of time. All of the poems, I suspect, more so than in my previous books, have this particular nostalgic hue, which stands to reason. This is a midlife book.

MILLER:

Later, in the poem “Question and Answer,” a student gets under the narrator’s skin a bit, asking if the poet is betraying his former selves by mining the past for poetry. It begs the question, who has the right to tell our stories? Do we even have a right to our own story? What happens when we as people and a nation can’t tell the story, when the poet can’t name the haunted legacies we live with? Or, as you ask in “Know Yourselves,” “How can a nation heal itself if it believes its story is not its own to tell?”

PARDLO:

For the same reason that an individual might repress certain memories, society will impose a collective amnesia: we find the memory too painful to bear. We tend to separate these ideas, but the impulse to ban books is sibling to the impulse to silence parts of our history, just as it is cousins with the impulse to topple monuments and to make pariahs of certain historical figures. *Spectral Evidence* is in large part responding to this unruly family of impulses that has showed up at our cultural door with all their bags and suitcases. This is why nations both need and revile poets. It’s the job of the poets to either assimilate our most unruly social impulses or send them packing to the nearest Holiday Inn. It’s the job of the poets to “name the haunted legacies,” as you so eloquently put it.

MILLER:

The book is full of tenderness and yet fiercely calls out our national and cultural diseases of racial and political violence. About our perennial theater of hurt playing out with police and gun violence, you write in “Dramaturgy” that “When the fourth wall is blue, bad actors are protected from critical review. When the fourth wall is a flag, bad actors are protected by the Second Amendment.” Yehuda Amichai once said in a *Paris Review* interview, “all poetry is political because real poems deal with human response to reality, and politics is part of reality, history in the making.” Would you agree with that idea that all poetry, even a poem about eating an apple, is political? Or do content and context create or change the stakes?

PARDLO:

Absolutely. Poetry is political. You could easily write a politically charged poem about eating an apple, first of all. Regardless, no one accidentally writes a poem about an apple. An apple can be made to appear neutral only by portraying it in the terms of dominant aesthetic values. When you choose to write a poem, you are choosing, consciously or not, to make a statement about what a poem is and can be, about what counts as the proper subject of a poem, and how that subject should take shape in the imagination. You are making an argument about what is beautiful or useful or good (or otherwise). That argument begs the question, for whom? This is not to take the joy out of poetry, but to highlight what makes poems rich in meaning and interpretive possibility. It’s only since New Criticism blurred our peripheral vision that we started to believe that the imagination and its inventions could be cordoned off from the social and political contexts that inspire them.

Maybe I'm always talking about my children, but this reminds me of a conversation I had with one of the teachers at their school. I asked why my kids kept drawing people with blue eyes. The teacher was dismissive, saying they're only eyes, as if I was making controversy where there was none. No one in our family has blue eyes. Very few people in our community have them. Why were my kids going out of their way to normalize something so uncommon? I didn't say this, but I wondered what the teachers would say if my kids started drawing pictures of Black Santa. The teachers would have approved, I'm sure, but likely for political reasons.

MILLER:

How do you get into political critique while navigating around bromides, polemics, or coming off as pitched propaganda? Is it possible to be both artist and activist? Or do you even think of this as activism? Is it just holding a mirror up to nature?

PARDLO:

I would flip part of your question and ask to what extent is it possible to ignore the polemical nature of poetry. Again: it's only since New Criticism blurred our peripheral vision that we started to believe the imagination and its expression could be cordoned off from the social and political contexts from which they emerged. To the other part of your question, bromides and propaganda: these are synonyms for cliché. Some readers like clichés because clichés affirm their perceptions. Clichés can be comforting, empowering even. On the other hand, if you're not into that kind of thing, you might prefer poems that defamiliarize the familiar. In that case, whether you're writing about an apple or an institution, the poem demands the same level of craft.

MILLER:

Spectral Evidence plays with form a lot and even challenges the idea of what can be a poem. You use prose, primary sources, essays, plays, photos, even a multiple-choice test. There was a big storm on social media recently on what makes a sonnet a sonnet, or what makes a poem. Do you feel the need to make an argument about how these pieces are poems? Do you feel there is a clear idea of what makes a poem a poem? Does it come down to, as you suggest in *Air Traffic*, the poem having a volta, or a turn of some kind?

PARDLO:

I don't feel the need to justify. That's not to dismiss the argument. I think the argument is worthwhile and healthy. You know, we talk about "culture wars" as if there were two sides, and that one side or the other might "win" when, in reality, culture is produced through the push and pull of purists and progressives and everyone in between. Debates over what a poem is or is not—these debates are necessary for our cultural hygiene. I like to make curmudgeonly arguments about voltas and what have you. When I'm writing a poem, however, I only care about what I can make it do. I am happiest when my work causes debates about what a poem is and is not.

MILLER:

You move through all of these forms, some of which upend the idea of the line as the primary unit of the poem. And yet there are some poems where the line and the line break are crafted with such precision. For example, in "Theater Selfie" you write "to make our lives as transparent as a middles schooler's // backpack." The understanding moves from a beautiful notion of childhood innocence to our

complicity in the national tragedy of mass shootings, school shootings, where “there is no hiding from the closed-circuit / karma obscura.” Or in the fish-hooking line break of “Law and Order” where you write, “His innocence will have been proven,” and then break the line so that the next one begins “irrelevant,” totally dismantling any celebration of justice. How do you think of the line and its function in the making of poetry?

PARDLO:

White space is fermata. Punctuation is percussion. Enjambment bends the note toward the limits of the key. The line break makes the poem swing. It don’t mean a thing if it ain’t got that, well, enjambment. A double-crossing line break can trigger the body’s sympathetic nervous system by signaling to the reader that they can’t count on the poem landing where they might expect it to land. This makes the poem emotionally dynamic. Form in general can function like the background music in a movie. It heightens the emotional experience of the content.

MILLER:

The poem “Erasure” is another poem that plays with what a poem can be. It is a floorplan of Rue de Notre Dame juxtaposed above a schematic drawing of a slave ship hull. Witnessing this pairing was immediately arresting, especially when you see their eerie similarity. I know how it felt to experience that piece, but I wonder if you could articulate what you were making or hoped readers would take away from that poem?

PARDLO:

I was on a word hunt, mining the architectural vocabulary of gothic churches. This was around the same time that I

was fixated on an internet meme I saw that shows a closeup of the saint's face in Bernini's sculpture the *Ecstasy of St. Teresa* beside a closeup of Lindsay Lohan passed out in the front seat of a car. The meme's satirical logic was in the background of my thoughts when I came across the schematic of the cathedral, and it (the cathedral) called to mind that famous illustration of the slave ship. It's one thing to *say* the church provided ideological cover for transatlantic slavery, but the juxtaposition of images opens that idea up for reflection in a way that I think avoids being didactic, or at least wears its didacticism in a novel way.

MILLER:

In much of your work there are allusions and references to literature, art, philosophy, and film. There's a kind of old-school hip hop sampling, as it were, of other artistic works. You drop them in without explaining or pointing them out in some direct way. They roll in as part of the poem, like Dr. Dre using the drums from the Winstons' "Amen Brother" for NWA's "Straight Outta Compton." One can enjoy the song without knowing the reference, but something more opens up when you see the cultural legacies Dre was drawing upon.

I think of you dropping the phrase "tupping the white ewe" in your memoir *Air Traffic*, or allusions in *Spectral Evidence* to Browning's "My Last Duchess," or to Baudelaire's "Fleurs de Mal" in the poem "digression." I tend to do the same in my poems but wonder at times why and will the reader get it? Do they need to? Do you think about some ideal reader who can pick up on these allusions? Or do these dips just roll out naturally while you are crafting the poem? Can the reader understand or enjoy the poem without having that extra level of context in mind?

PARDLO:

OMG, that album! I want to talk about Ice Cube's verse on "Parental Discretion Iz Advised." All the members of NWA are amazing on that track, but Cube steals the show: "I be what is known as a bandit / you gotta hand it to me when you truly understand it / 'Cause if you fail to see—read it in Braille, it'll still be funky . . ." The entire verse is worth quoting, but I think this much captures my philosophy entirely. The metrical complexity and the internal rhyme are enough to enchant, but on top of that, he's signifying in a way that is characteristic of African American literary and oral traditions. I think of it as inscribing varying registers of intimacy in the work. When I catch an obscure or culturally specific reference in a poem, I feel like the poet and I share a secret.

No single reader is able to exhaust a poem of its meaning. You and I may agree on some interpretations, but you will arrive at others that are entirely different from mine. Every reading is unique to the reader. That's why we have literary criticism. Criticism allows us to puzzle together our various readings to get at deeper, richer meanings than any of us could get on our own. My hope is that even if you're reading my poems for the lowest common denominator—engaging the work at its most denotative level—it will still, at least, be funky. My hope is that the poems bear and reward multiple readings.

MILLER:

Air Traffic was, in many ways, you wrestling with definitions of manhood and masculinity. *Spectral Evidence* pushes off from there and goes further, diving into questions of womanhood and definitions of gender in general. In "Magnificat," you write, "as if to be recognized as a woman she had to endure trauma." You reference this being the

century of the woman. You write beautifully about your mother's interiority in "Beauty School Wig Head: The Marion Devotions," which also has a reference to your children ("that was around the time I became a girl / dad") and ends with your claim that "by beauty I mean / all that is woman in me." Do you have a sense of where this search and questioning comes from? The current political state? Becoming father to two girls?

PARDLO:

Most of the time, I feel like masculinity is America's harmful inner voice. As the mouthpiece of patriarchy, it is the source of so many problems, but it keeps yapping away, convinced that it is the solution to the problems that it causes. Masculinity struggles to grasp nuance because its language is binary: man/woman, weak/strong, us/them. I'm trying to train myself out of listening to that voice. It's not so much that I'm seeking femininity, either. Instead, I'm looking for ways to express the fullness of my humanity.

MILLER:

In casting the racial violence against the backdrop of (mostly) women persecuted in the witch trials, you show this great capacity for empathy, for looking at the experiences of the other and seeing how you share common ground, even if it's across race, gender, and centuries. We are so often making our pain and our joy as particular only to us—or to whatever tribe we claim. You push against that, and I think back to the poem "digression," where you borrow from Baudelaire, writing, "Mon semblable" or "my likeness, my brother." And in "Know Yourselves," you write, "What if we defined ourselves by our ability to relate to others?" Was there something that made you need to reach out with this empathy and show us our common nature?

PARDLO:

These are all amazing questions, Matt. Thank you. This question in particular means a lot to me because, while I have pretty strong intuitive feelings about empathy and tribalism, I am still struggling for a way to talk about that intuition. I'm struggling perhaps because my motives are not quite as altruistic as a phrase like "our common nature" might suggest. I really just want to glimpse the abyss on the other side of identity.

If I say I'm trying to write my way out of or around identity, many will interpret that to mean that I don't want to be Black or that I'm pursuing some quixotic agenda to topple the patriarchy. Maybe that second part is kinda true, but really, I am trying to imagine a way to talk about identity that doesn't require me to declare my allegiances in exchange for permission to question the roles these allegiances play in our lives. It's like having to praise the emperor's clothes before one can raise the question as to whether he has any.

Stuart Hall described race as a "discourse," meaning it is something that exists in the ways that we talk about it, in how it is overheard, interpreted, and imagined. The more countries I check off on my travel app—and see the myriad ways societies determine who should get what, who should be allowed to go where, and whose lives are and are not disposable—the more I understand what we mean when we say that identity is constructed. I'm not saying that if we stop talking about race it will go away. But I am interested in what worlds become imaginable, what we can learn about our common condition, perhaps, when we clear the landscape of these overgrown discourses. This, too, is the job of the poet: chief weed whacker and landscape engineer.

MILLER:

And yet there is that place where empathy and reaching out can only take us so far. I think again of “Beauty School Wig Head,” where you write, “my mother is a mirror / in which I cannot appear,” and how her happiness is “independent / of our observation.” There’s much we share, but there’s much we don’t. Do you think there is a place we simply cannot bridge between each other?

PARDLO:

Yes, I think so, but I wonder how much of that is cultural. I mean, we don’t have many narratives that affirm acting in the interest of people we’ve categorized as “other.” I’m aware, for example, that my patriarchal upbringing prevents me from seeing certain versions of my mother’s happiness. Similarly, it may be unimaginable for Americans to show the same concern for my well-being that we show for white women, unless, maybe, I remind us how easily white women were once executed for sport and spectacle as so many Black men are today. So maybe I believe our culture is hostile to certain kinds of empathy. I guess that by continuing to write anyway, I am admitting to having hope that there are ways we might be able to hack the culture into letting us see more of ourselves in one another.