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Poetry: Toward Speaking For

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Jazz, Song, Poetry Toward Speaking For

I

In 1985 Larry Coryell and Emily Remler released an album of guitar duets. Coryell pioneered the "fusion" of jazz and rock styles in the mid-sixties, and has developed that border area ever since. Remler, a more recently risen star, has more closely followed a jazz line of development. The two performed together at various concerts before going into the studio. Their common ground included a shared respect for past guitar masters and a repertoire ranging from jazz standards through Latin and flamenco-influenced originals. On the record, they both play jazz electric guitars (arch-topped, hollow-bodied) except on the two tunes written by Coryell, on which they play identical acoustic guitars (steel-stringed, graphite-topped Adamas models manufactured by Ovation, a company whose instruments Coryell has long endorsed).

It's usual in duet recordings to segregate the two players on the two stereo channels, adding a footnote on the album cover to identify who's heard on the left channel and who on the right, as if the musicians were sitting in separate booths—as, in the studio, they may well be. But as if to underscore the sense of confluence in this musical occasion, Remler's and Coryell's album, called *Together*, is mixed so that both instruments sound near the center, the reverberations of both guitars spreading out to the sides as the sound does for the audience in a live performance. The resulting ambience is in auditory terms more realistic. But a live audience can usually *see* who is playing what, who's soloing and who's accompanying. Listening to the album, we can identify which notes belong to whom only *by* listening—and listening not for the mere uninformative location of the sound but for its personality.

Neil Tesser, who wrote the liner notes for *Together* and praises not only the music and the musicians but also the engineering decision to mix the stereo this way, remarks that "It's not hard to tell these

two guitarists apart." Nevertheless, he offers a crib for the hard of hearing by stating that Emily Remler "solos first on the opener, 'Arubian Nights,'" and referring to Larry Coryell's "break (the second solo) on 'Joy Spring.'" But Tesser is wrong. On "Joy Spring," Remler does solo first and Coryell second; but Coryell solos before Remler on his composition, "Arubian Nights."

How did I know who was who, more or less without thinking about it, the first time I heard the album? Only when I reread the liner notes and realized the discrepancy between them and my hearing did I begin to doubt my own recognition. After that, of course, I needed repeated listenings before I could feel absolutely sure. (Larry Coryell has since confirmed my identification.) Before thought tangled the millipede's feet, recognition was as immediate as my recognition of any familiar voice on the telephone or radio or tape recording, or floating in from the next room. With doubt, though, came analysis.

Another realm in which the ability to recognize voices sometimes comes under scrutiny is the courtroom. An article from a recent *Providence Journal* bears these headlines: "Judge faults fairness of 'voice line-up,' blocks its use as evidence / Police told to use more similar voices when making tape."

In the intimate and immediate process of recognition, whether of human or of instrumental "voices," we combine facts from both ends of the scale of auditory experience, from the millisecond to the minute—from the finest discriminations between atoms of sound that the ear can make, to the broadest patterns of repetition and variation that the memory can retain. When instead we seek to establish an identity for a problematic voice, or to confirm and explain an identification, we turn to some sort of conscious analysis; and since analysis gains depth and precision by sacrificing breadth, we're likely to focus on one end of the scale or the other. At one end, the details of sound can be subjected to experimental exegesis in the psychologist's laboratory. The critic, on the other hand, wants to address more macroscopic issues of style than duplicable experiments could comprehend. Someone who finds a unique oscilloscopic measure for the quality of Emily Remler's picking attack discovers a fact that will *only* identify her playing, not indicate its character or its coherence. So the critic naturally aims high. We try to name the aesthetic premises and decisions that define the player's style, and gather them into

systematic characterizations and discriminations. More specifically, we select phrases that seem characteristic, and try to pinpoint the character they express. I began by transcribing all four solos, to set before myself exactly what the phrases were.

There are countless famous earmarks in jazz playing: Johnny Hodges' scooped long notes, Thelonius Monk's whole-tone runs, the public library of phrases to be mined from Charlie Parker, and so on. The student player learns these licks, and may come to distinguish the exact quality of a rising minor-ninth arpeggio played by Jim Hall from one played by Joe Pass. In one sense, then, a sufficiently extensive collection of techniques invented by or habitual to a certain player might be thought to define that player's style. By the same token, though, anyone equipped to make such a collection is probably equipped to duplicate it. Many jazz disciples learn their mentors' styles thoroughly enough to fool a listener. Duncan James's imitations of George Barnes are sometimes that flawless; Jon Faddis, who has since "found his own voice," began by digesting much of the sound and awesome technical flexibility of Dizzy Gillespie. Identifications based on "signature" phrases can be precise; but they can also be false.

Only Emily Remler, on this record, plays variations on this figure, derived from a technical exercise in slurring:



Remler's phrase

Near the end of her second solo chorus on "Arubian Nights," she uses the figure twice in different positions to underscore how the harmonies shift at this point in the tune:



"Arubian Nights," chorus 5, measures 30-31

A few measures later she uses just the first half of the figure, though for much the same purposes:



"Arubian Nights," chorus 6, measures 3-4

In "Joy Spring," on the other hand, halfway through her third chorus she repeats the first half of the figure in such a way as to build up to the whole again:



"Joy Spring," chorus 4, measures 13-15

These examples share (aside from the left-hand technique itself) the common function of outlining a harmonic progression. But they show very different structural impulses: toward continuity, syncopation, and progression respectively. It would be hard to say whether Remler's style is better defined by the sameness or the difference, by consistency or variation.

Another kind of technique—based more in the right hand than in the left—marks Coryell's solos. Once or twice in each solo, he releases nervous energy in a way that at these tempos (M.M. 196 in "Arubian Nights," M.M. 212 in "Joy Spring") transcription can only approximate. In "Arubian Nights," near the end of his final chorus, he plays something like this:



"Arubian Nights," chorus 3, measures 17-26

Similarly, he punctuates his second chorus in "Joy Spring" with this sudden shower:

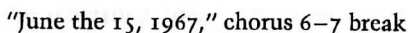


"Joy Spring," chorus 6, measures 18-19

And the first half of his next chorus is dominated by almost equally fast triplet runs.

But the picture is complicated by other, equally distinctive playing patterns. As far as I can determine, it was Larry Coryell who invented this flashing, incantatory riff, which he uses in both "June the 15, 1967" and "Good Citizen Swallow" on the Gary Burton Quartet's *Lofty Fake Anagram* album from 1968 (the third of Burton's albums on which Coryell played, and the second which led the jazz-rock fusion movement):

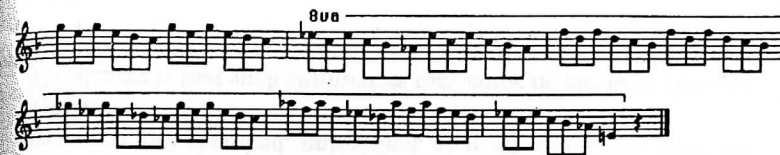
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Close similarity, both in sound and in finger movement, suggests that the player of these exuberant notes near the end of "Arabian Nights" is Coryell:



—as Tesser assures us; but he also assures us that in "Joy Spring" the solo that includes this passage



"Joy Spring," chorus 3, measures 16-24

is played by Emily Remler. In fact, Remler plays both of the solos that include the phrase that was "patented," as musicians sometimes say, by Coryell. Whether she's consciously quoting and extending those old, widely known Coryell recordings, or is instead developing what has become a standard guitar lick, even she could probably not be sure.

The undisputed guitar patent on octave double-stops is held by the late Wes Montgomery. So clear an influence is he on Emily Remler (through George Benson, through Pat Martino), and so far has Coryell's work over the last twenty years taken him from that jazz mainstream, that we might expect passages in octaves to mark Remler's solos. She does indeed use them frequently on this album as on others. But at many points Coryell seizes on the technique, a good odd instance being this striking passage from "Arubian Nights":



"Arabian Nights," choruses 2-3

It's possible that performing with Remler reminded Coryell of stylistic materials he hadn't used for some time, to which he returned with new enthusiasm; but the strands of influence are too braided for this to be more than speculation.

The predictions about the identity of the players that are generated by these signature phrases turn out to be incorrect half the time—a result no better than random guessing. Adding to the inventory of both players' resources does improve the score. (Remler plays more

extended, syncopated sequences; Coryell plays more repeated notes, and so on.) Yet these inventories are not only unreliable as stylistic touchstones, but also insufficient for stylistic definition. Large parts of each solo—including not only filling or bridging passages and half-idle pauses for thought, but also some of the most distinctive moments—can't be assigned to either player on the basis of proprietary materials. Some are apparently brand new, thought up by Remler or Coryell on the spur of the moment. Others belong to a vocabulary either traceable to specific forerunners—Django Reinhardt, Pat Martino, Charlie Christian—or general to all players. When accompanying rather than soloing, both guitarists use a rich technique that combines punctuating chords and an almost independent bass line—a method that seems to have been invented in the fifties by Jim Hall when his guitar was the only harmonic instrument in the Jimmy Giuffre Three. Coryell plays the melody of "How My Heart Sings" in fingered harmonics, which Tal Farlow developed in the late forties. Into their solos on "Joy Spring," each guitarist inserts one quotation, a device almost as old as jazz, developed into different forms of wit by various players; Remler and Coryell declare their allegiance to Bebop by quoting, as Charlie Parker so often did, not from show tunes or the jazz repertoire itself, but from that common fund of music we all know well enough to make it nearly anonymous: Remler, a few bars of "The Irish Washerwoman," and Coryell, an answering phrase from the English round, "Christmas Is Coming."

As I marshal my reasoning, then, my argument that Tesser must be mistaken in his identification of the soloists on "Arubian Nights," I find that however long I pore over my transcriptions my real evidence belongs to the original experience of hearing, and resides in details that remain unexplainably minute. An exasperated voice saying "Just listen!" keeps interrupting what strives to be generalized stylistic analysis.

Not that this recognition is a purely sensory act. Some of its preconditions include my having listened to both players almost since Coryell began to record, and my having transcribed solos by other players with different styles. Most relevant of all may be the fact that I play jazz guitar. I have a sense, not only of how the left hand feels while fingering a certain series of notes, but of how the right hand plucks a string or moves a plectrum—the infinitesimally graded dif-

ferences in pressure and timing and position, in both hands, that bring the guitar as close as it can come (without electronic manipulation) to the variations in resonance of vowels in a human mouth. It's more difficult for me to identify pianists; it requires more conscious thought, more deliberate attention. Even identifying trumpeters or saxophonists is a less immediate act for me, though those instruments bear a warmer relation to the voice than does the guitar. It's possible that if I were mute I'd find recognizing my wife's voice a more intellectual exercise that I do—that some ground of possible imitation underlies our finest, most unconscious knacks of knowing. We know the feel of our voices in our mouths, and can therefore imagine ourselves possessing the mouth that produces a different voice.

If "voice" is an idea about style as personal (identifiable, individual, authentic), it has two inseparable but logically distinct aspects; for the jazz player we can think of them as *sound* and *invention*. To identify a player, we consider how harmonically adventurous and melodically cogent and rhythmically alert the improvisation is; and we listen to him or her making the notes. (The balance between sound and invention is altered, not very subtly, by the fact of recording, which on the one hand alters and distances the sound, and on the other hand emphasizes invention by making it possible to study the solo.) Tesser's descriptions of the two players quite properly combine these aspects. He calls attention to Remler's "fuller, rounded tone," and he also observes that

she rarely plays a note that's rhythmically out of place. Coryell, on the other hand, has always maintained a noticeable twang to his guitar sound, in deference to his rock 'n' blues roots; what's more, his solos are rhythmically quirkier, wilder.

Remler's rhythmic precision feels willed, a result not of abandoning herself to the music but of riding it with superlative control; every conclusion she reaches is airtight, every challenge definitively met, every flight of fancy solidly rooted. Coryell, on the other hand, ranges dissatisfied through his solos, all bravado and trial, sometimes he leaves a gesture sketched, unfinished, as if its conclusion were too obvious.

The danger is that such summaries may come no closer to defining

individual style than describing Robert Frost as a poet of cagey wit who writes moralized rural landscapes—a description that fits Andrew Marvell about equally well. In further refining my descriptions, I would be abstracting more and more distantly from the music. Nor do the generalities prevent Tesser from making (unless it's a slip of the pen) his outright mistake in identification. The descriptions come after the fact of recognition. They wouldn't be likely to help another listener very much in learning to tell the two players apart. The audience that can be informed and pleased by Whitney Balliett's impressionistic descriptions of jazz players' characteristic solos isn't an audience that doesn't know the players' styles, but one that hasn't made the reasons for the recognition conscious. Stylistic analyses can substantiate and help explain recognition, but not initiate it or prove its correctness. Listening, analyzing, and recognizing reinforce each other: We hear the details of touch, abstract from them an image of personality, listen through that filtering image to further details, refine the image, and so on. Analysis traces or imitates the path of the listening mind as it sorts the auditory world into identifiable persons.

II

When we turn from instrumental music to song, we find that recognition partakes still more of our daily skill in knowing each other. This is the fun of "Dida," a pleasant, wordless interlude in Joan Baez' album, *Diamonds and Rust*, on which she is joined by Joni Mitchell. Baez' voice is unmistakable in its strength and characteristic vibrato; Mitchell's has a distinctive throatiness and vertiginous sense of range; both voices are as familiar to a generation or more of listeners as those of presidents and TV anchor men. In "Dida," they exchange statements of the brisk, sentimental melody, and then entwine comments on each other's brief improvisatory phrases. The fun, that is, consists in our having to pay attention so as to know who is singing, but not to endure great difficulty at it. (A more elaborate example is the recording by Art Garfunkel, Paul Simon, and James Taylor of Sam Cooke's "What a Wonderful World It Could Be." Our practiced ears are asked to identify not only the quick changes among

lead singers, but also the three possible pairs of singers. It's a delightful example of complex, instant nostalgia.) The reason for the relative ease of our identifications is not so much that Baez and Mitchell (and Simon, Garfunkel, and Taylor) are better known to most of us than Remler and Coryell, but that these are literal voices, not translations of the immediate human reality of voice into an instrumental extension.

Another tune from Baez' album reinforces the point, yet complicates it. In one stanza of Dylan's "A Simple Twist of Fate," Baez—whose relation to Dylan is old, famous, and subject to glancing and direct comments throughout this album—mimics Dylan's singing. The mimicry is obvious; yet Baez can't possibly make her voice sound very much like Dylan's. Instead, she employs the usual tools of parody, imitating the most distinctive elements of Dylan's vocal style: the speech rhythm breaking across the musical meter; the free treatment of pitch halfway between the nonce tunes that help encode the meanings of speech and the sustained curves of chant or song; a hint of Dylan's nasal tone. When a singer's voice masquerades, it doesn't fool or confuse us, but it renders our act of recognition double: We hear Baez *doing* Dylan.

Tom Waits's song, "A Sight for Sore Eyes," realizes some of the serious dramatic potential implicit in this method of vocal impersonation. The song is included in Waits's 1977 album, *Foreign Affairs*, which offers a number of striking experiments in diction and form. There is "Potter's Field," an extended, imagistic narrative chanted in a dreamlike gigantization of crooks' slang, with no definable melody and—very unusually in popular song—no rhyme. There is the almost-title song, "Foreign Affair," which uses an inflated polysyllabic diction to both mock pretension and insist on an absurd but irreducible dignity. There's a bar scene with Bette Midler; an impassioned love song addressed to the eponymous logo on Muriel cigars; and a Rabelaisian Beat road adventure culminating in a double-entendre version of "California Here I Come." All this zest is heightened by Waits's voice—a gravelly, half-lisping, surprisingly supple vehicle for tones ranging all the way from gross through sardonic to poignant.

Halfway through the album, after this voice is well established in our ears, Waits opens "A Sight for Sore Eyes" with a piano introduction that's a tinkling eight-bar quotation of "Auld Lang Syne"; then

his playing shifts to the childish tidiness of the song's accompaniment, at once a waltz and a lullaby. (His own piano will remain the song's only accompaniment—as on the other most remarkable song on the album, "Burma Shave"—except for a discreet bass.) Singing across the tardy beat of the waltz, as if he could barely keep up with it, he begins the string of clichés that are the foundation of the lyrics: "Hey sight for sore eyes it's a long time no see / workin hard hardly workin hey man you know me . . ." Waits is a master at the technique (familiar throughout twentieth-century poetry, rarer in song) of re-contextualizing platitudes for ironic or revelatory effect. It goes along with his ear, which Williams might have appreciated, for a kind of debased patois that has been utilized only marginally by literature.

What's striking about this opening verse is that the voice in which Waits sings it isn't his own. To explain how the physical sound of a voice can be recognizable (we never doubt that it's Waits singing), and yet different from itself (the personality isn't the one we hear consistently in the rest of the album), might be a task for the scientist of vocal production. Listening, we simply hear the difference. The voice masquerades, not in its essential qualities (just as Baez can't really sound very much like Dylan), but in its gestures of personality. The physical voice remains the same; but Waits uses it to *do* a character.

If the voice isn't Tom Waits's, whose is it? Supposing that a voice projects, among other aspects of personality, a somatic type, we can hear this one as belonging to a man of a certain age and girth, settled into a certain degree of dissipation and failure. Waits revives the word *palooka* to describe him (though in his mouth it describes the others in the bar where we find him). He is as he says "half drunk all the time and i'm all drunk the rest," maudlin, vain, pathetic; he thinks almost exclusively in clichés. He's a type.

That we assign the clichés to him rather than to Waits is the result, as well as one of the causes, of our distinguishing the character's voice from the songwriter's. This is the elementary function of what in poetry since Browning has been called "dramatic monologue." Waits thinks in dramatic terms (especially in terms of the movies: the record sleeve speaks of "I Never Talk to Strangers" as "co-starring" Bette Midler). The monologue is a natural form for him. In "A Sight for Sore Eyes" the separation from the character in whose mouth the

words are put is no subtle distinction like the irreducible modernist distance between Poet and Speaker. The writer stands as distant as the painter of portraits, not of self-portraits; and this distance is announced first by the very quality of Waits's voice, which he constrains to a mellow obesity belied alike by his other songs and his photographs. As for stylistic qualities more readily available to literary or musical analysis, they don't much help us in the fundamental act of distinguishing this voice from Waits's "own"; instead they proceed, *after* we make the distinction, to inform us about the person being spoken for.

Waits has carried on formal experiments begun by Dylan: jamming long verbal lines into short musical phrases, opening up the almost universal foursquare quatrains of popular song, delaying or crowding rhymes to make their recurrence less automatic and more expressive. But the form of "A Sight for Sore Eyes" is as conventional as the lilt of the tune and its harmonization in thirds by the piano, or as the blandness of the clichés. All these aspects of dullness work to characterize the man we hear speaking. On the record sleeve the lyrics are printed as couplets, many of them with internal rhyme ("guess you heard about nash, he was killed in a crash"), emphasizing even more than the usual typography of quatrains the straightforward rigor of the form.

In fact, the rigor is even greater than convention would lead us to expect. Alliteration and assonance abound ("hey sight for sore eyes it's a long time no see"), along with more complex morphemic repetitions ("and hey barkeep what's keepin you keep pouring drinks"). While most songwriters allow themselves great liberty in rhyming (as Waits does elsewhere, sometimes suggesting Wilfrid Owen's slant rhymes), the refrain of this song emphasizes a strict rhyme: "keep pourin drinks / for all these palookas hey you know what I thinks." In this rhyme, where a formal nicety enlists a grammatical solecism, the songwriter and his invented character meet head on.

Again, our consciousness of Tom Waits as a performing artist—the singer as well as the writer of his song—adds a kind of shadowy third level to the complex of identities confronting us. Not only does he sing, and in the manner of his singing present the dynamic relation between the song he has written and the character he has created, but he plays the piano. (Here is the commonplace miracle that in music

one may *accompany oneself*.) The gentle, inexorable sound of that accompaniment becomes the most constantly eloquent commentary on the whole monologue.

Contempt isn't what we finally feel; the character is *not* a type, though his ability to express an individual self is severely limited—so limited that it becomes the job of the song to do it for him. Our recognition of that personal uniqueness, despite the limitation, is partly the result of eloquent simplicities scattered here and there among the verbal detritus. The penultimate stanza, about Nash's death, is the most oddly powerful, at least as sung (like most good lyrics, it looks irredeemably flat and awkward on the page):

guess you heard about nash he was killed in a crash
hell that must of been two or three years ago now
yea he spun out and he rolled he hit a telephone pole
and he died with the radio on

The farce of the opening internal rhyme is minutely undercut by the hint of automotive nostalgia in Nash's very name—even the most blatant of lines has its quirk. The next line reminds us how intermittent is the speaker's contact with such old friends as he is addressing. The diction of the third line ("spun out" and "rolled," and especially the grammatical identification of the car with the driver) evokes the macho romance of cars even while the context freezes the bravado. The chill settles most in the tidy though imperfect rhymes, whose closure is satisfying, reductive, funny, and horrifying. And the last line, whose disavowal of rhyme helps give it the isolated timelessness of an epitaph, achieves the song's height of improbable, unsentimental poignancy. By this point in the song we have advanced at least from contempt to compassion.

Marvelously, we don't remain even at that half-comfortable distance. The breaking point in our detachment comes in the last repetition of the refrain. Any singer is likely to vary his or her delivery of a refrain, often altering the last occurrence, especially, in the direction of speech rhythms; so does Waits here. But much more strikingly, his vocal "mask" slips for just a moment; on the word *palookas* his own voice, the one we know from the rest of the album, breaks through the donned voice of his character. Suddenly, momentarily, the distance among character and writer and listener that makes dramatic monologue possible, and is made possible by it, collapses, as if an

actor caught sight of himself in a mirror. Here's the moment—perhaps unexpected in a song like this—where Aristotelian pity for undeserved suffering (who deserves to be as pointless as this speaker?) is joined by the consequent Aristotelian terror for ourselves. The voice becomes the vehicle of imaginative identification.

III

That we use the metaphor of voice in talking about poems suggests a powerful belief in language, a belief that we *are*—even more than what we say—how we sound in saying it. Hence the injunction to young poets to "find their own voice," a formula that also acknowledges the difficulty of transferring vocal identity to the foreign medium of print. Yet the dramatic monologue, more than any other poetic mode, puzzles this simplistic faith in the individual lyric voice.

With regard to monologue, the whole situation of poetry differs markedly from song. Written poetry has no physical voice to act directly on our hearing, and no immediate sensory recognition takes place. All our discriminations among characters, narrator, author, and whatever other entities we need to posit in reading, derive from the mute, unifying façade of print. Voice, in poems, has to be constructed or reconstructed by a reader's imagination. The relation between the reading imagination and the printed material on which it dwells is dynamic and ambiguous; and so is the result. Because of this ambiguity, a written monologue can exfoliate in more directions than a song.

Dramatic monologues remind us forcefully that the meaning of what is said depends on who says it.

An ordinary man, though, a man like me
eats and is full.
Only God is never satisfied.

These words change in tone when we locate them at the end of a poem called "The Good Shepherd: Atlanta, 1981" (Ai, *Sin*). To speak of "irony" isn't sufficient. Print is both the most impersonal and the most intimate home of language. It belongs to nobody, is a thing; yet in reading it, with the imaginative and prosodic attention proper to

poetry, we adopt it, as if we find ourselves speaking the words in order to understand them. Whether we read aloud or subvocalize or listen only to a voice in our minds, we somehow make the words ours before we can assign them to anyone else. To find the words of a child murderer in our mouths produces no simple revulsion, but a network of forces that includes the most intricate sympathy. Poems that are more purely lyric don't thrust but ease us into adopting an alien point of view, which we identify as belonging to the poet; dramatic monologues divide us more aggressively from ourselves.

To begin with, then, the poet must include among the opening strategies of a dramatic monologue some way both to raise and to solve the basic question of who is talking—to alert us that it's not the poet's own voice, and to give us a way to identify whose it is. Browning uses his titles: "Soliloquy in a Spanish Cloister" tells us most of what we need to know before we begin; "My Last Duchess" requires of us an extra deductive step; "Andrea del Sarto" and others give us the sop that most readily, if often meaninglessly, satisfies our curiosity: a name. This tradition of the packed, informative title is carried further by Eliot ("The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock") and Pound ("The River Merchant's Wife: A Letter").

Among contemporary poets, no one has more whole-heartedly embraced the dramatic monologue than Ai. Her fourth collection, *Sin* (1986), is all monologues, though they vary widely in kind and method. In most of them, the titles still set the stage and name the player: "The Journalist," "The Death of Francisco Pizarro," "The Priest's Confession."

But some of Ai's poems enact a more delicate gambit. The title of the first poem in the book, "Two Brothers," sounds blandly generic. When we come in the sixth line to "Death, Bobby, hit me . . .," the bell may or may not go off; even if we do leap to a name for the speaker at this first hint, we've already absorbed a certain amount of poetry ("You swim toward me out of sleep / like an eel") that quarrels with the image of him we bring with us out of history, because the intimacy of the language is so ahistorical. Seven lines later we get "Dallas. Dallas"; four lines after that, "John-John," and then "the White House." Though "Jack Kennedy" doesn't name himself until the third and last section of the six-page poem, we know him well before.

Our identification, while founded on piecemeal induction from

fragmentary associations, is bound to come to us suddenly, as a whole, at one of these points. In that respect it resembles our recognition of a human voice. Because it's delayed, it reaches us together with the shock of *not* having recognized the voice. Even in the act of identifying the speaker, we're made conscious that the language is owned doubly, by the poet who makes it and by the character who belongs also to the independent world of history.

Nor is the language simply double. Reading a page, it's only by some kind of factual or stylistic analysis, conscious or subliminal, whose object isn't a human gestalt but a poetic one, that we can identify anybody. This constraint seems quite dreadful in the abstract; but it becomes a condition of freedom, in which awareness can shift from one fictive self to another, the poet's own hypothesized self being perhaps not even the first among equals, but the most muted. While the natural condition in jazz is dialogue, and in song two or three voices at most can be split out from the sensory whole, poetry in its very silence tends toward what Mikhail Bakhtin has taught us to call "dialogism"—despite Bakhtin's own opposition of the novel to the supposed monologism of poetry. (A useful collection of Bakhtin's work on dialogics, especially in the novel, is *The Dialogic Imagination*, edited by Michael Holquist, translated by Caryl Emerson and Holquist [University of Texas Press, 1981]. I'm grateful to Don Bialostosky for introducing me to Bakhtin's work.)

The subtle uncertainty about ownership of the language in the first lines of "Two Brothers" (the subtitle, "A Fiction," helps to detach the voice in our minds from the poet, but not to settle it elsewhere) allows the words to hover among possible voices. This somewhat resembles our hearing both Waits and his character in "A Sight for Sore Eyes." But the second section of Ai's poem redoubles the ventriloquy: It's entirely quoted, by Jack, from Bobby ("I have this dream, Jack, you say.") To quote the end of the section requires quite a bouquet of punctuation: "'With nothing to say to anybody, / except, 'My brother is the moon.''" At this point we comprehend Jack, through Bobby's feeling about him in his dream, as he recounts it, as Jack understands it in quoting it, as we hear him speaking through several decades of our factual and mythic knowledge of Jack Kennedy, including our awareness that they are both dead. And this account doesn't include Ai's own intensity of selection and linguistic brilliance.

This layering is a kind of realism. Our consciousness is shaped by

surrounding consciousnesses. (Bakhtin: "The ideological becoming of a human being . . . is the process of selectively assimilating the words of others.") The ability to reenact this becoming, or at least to present its result without badly oversimplifying, is a strength of the dramatic monologue, and the distance and neutrality of print are its most efficient medium.

In these poems it's not Jack or Bobby Kennedy talking, or Pizarro or Joe McCarthy or Robert Oppenheimer; no one is talking; anyone might be. Identifying the speaker depends on facts, on statements we can somehow be sure the poet wouldn't make, on names and other externals. All Ai's poems in *Sin* are marked by this dramatic externality. The speaker is always, whether a known historical figure or not, involved in named historical events (as in "The Journalist," "The Detective," "Elegy," "The Emigré"). Even the most anonymous speeches are carefully linked to history; the second stanza of "Immortality" begins with mention of the Great War. The one poem apparently spoken by the poet without the mediation of an invented character ("Conversation / For Robert Lowell") is addressed to the famous dead poet. (The following and matching poem, "More," is "For James Wright"; but it's apparently spoken by Wright, not to him.) But as I noted earlier, this historicity that Ai uses to anchor the poems is constantly undermined by the quality of her vividly metaphorical language, which adopts from surrealism an insistence on the untranslatable primacy of internal experience. The question of whose experience is enacted, in whose interior the language reverberates, remains in flux as we read:

I stare at myself in the mirror:
Jack Kennedy,
thinner now, almost ascetic,
wearing the exhaust fumes of L.A.
like a sharkskin suit,
while the quarter moon
hangs from heaven,
a swing on a gold chain. My throne.

No one is talking, including the poet, who is writing. Dramatic monologue creates tensions between our imagination of the speaker and our imagining of the poet's own speaking of the poem. When we seek, through the crowd, the poet's own "voice," we are "listening" for consistencies in the decisions of a writer who's attending, among

other things, to "sound." If my quotation marks are to be denied at all—if the metaphor of voice in poetry is to have any sensory substance—we must not only assign the speech to a speaker, but imagine the sound of the words and assign the sound to an imagined mouth. If the sounds show consistencies from poem to poem, we assign them to the poet, and hear the other voices as *quoted* by her. Lifting written words into sound is the province of prosody, and we turn naturally to the details of versification in order to characterize the poet's voice.

Throughout *Sin*, Ai sticks close to a form depending on variable but fairly short lines, divided according to syntactical boundaries, so that the lines don't call much attention to themselves as lines:

I lie on my daughter's body
to hold her in the earth,
but she won't stay;
she rises, lifting me with her,
as if she were air
and not some remnant
of failed reeducation
in a Cambodian mass grave.
("The Detective")

But if one does stop to examine the lines, they reveal care. Each adds a measured gesture to the developing sentence, changing our understanding of the lines that precede it. Sometimes, most conventionally, the line-breaks isolate a constellation of images ("baseball, hard work, beer halls"); sometimes a quasi-apotheism ("I gave up music for Justice"); sometimes a tune of phonemes ("a shoulder / death has whitened thin and sharp"); sometimes a common phrase shocked into intense puzzlement ("You know what I mean"—which suddenly seems quite impossible). We might be able to recognize the poet in an unidentified collection of such lines. A poet's particular verve in the making of lines can function as a kind of hallmark or signature—or voice. The rhythmic and phonetic orderings that we gather under the name of prosody constitute—once print has become the medium of poems—the remaining link between the poem and the human voice. This link may be seen as the characteristic that distinguishes poetic from nonpoetic writing; in any case, it's the closest thing to a literal "voice" in a poem.

Yet surely Ai's "voice" as a poet is characterized by larger choices:

by the title of the book and the vision of historical existence it implies; by the violence of her images; above all by what characters, what voices, she chooses to *do*. Several of her dramatic speakers are villains (like many of Browning's); many are victims—including some of the villains. These choices give the poems a moral or political point. The act of choice gives the poems their ethical character, and surely ethical character is a central feature of the speaking personality we seem to prize when we venerate "the poet's voice," an individual voice, a voice that demands to be heard. Ai's insistence on historicity is both a poetic device—the establishment of a common ground on which to know and distinguish speakers—and a framework for the political import of her book, part of what makes her an audible "voice" in contemporary poetry.

So the voice of the poet is both one and many. It comprises both sound (imaginatively reconstructed) and statement. It's both larger and smaller than the voices of her characters, to be found in both the grit they are made of and the stuff they breathe, as fish are composed largely of water.

IV

The defining task of political poetry is to speak out against wrongs inflicted on ourselves or others. The task for white male middle-class poets in the United States after the second World War is to speak for others: for those who have been silenced by governments, by imprisonment, by starvation, by death.

The rhetoric required by this kind of political poetry is different from the rhetoric natural to revolutionary poetry, poetry that seeks to liberate a group to which the poet herself or himself belongs. (Of course liberating others is a way to liberate oneself; indeed, my point is that for people with no apparent need for liberation, that may be the *only* available way.) To speak for someone else is ventriloquy; and everything we've seen about the dramatic monologue makes it the obvious form for an other-directed political poem. The poet, for whom it's physically safe to do so, will project himself imaginatively into the situation of the oppressed person, using the poem to say what that other can't say aloud. The poem will be called, for in-

stance, by the name of a governmentally murdered Chilean songwriter, Victor Jara, who will be made to say "I" throughout.

But something will go wrong. Even if the North American poet (against rather steep odds) can construct a plausible speech for his Chilean counterpart, one that both captures Jara's individuality and treats him as representative, the poem still threatens to be condescending. After all, the indignity of being forcibly silenced is more aggravated than corrected by having someone else take over one's speaking, put words in one's mouth, publicize a hypothetical version of one's feelings.

Ai's poems (especially those spoken by victims, such as "The Prisoner") avoid this trap by means of their ambiguous relation to historical reality. The speaker's situation is historically defined, but the language is so internal that it seems to conduct its business of disclosure below or behind consciousness, like a kind of body language. The speaker gives herself or himself away as if unknowingly; the poet proceeds on another level entirely, arranging, enabling; and the relation between them—though richly complex in its ethical features—remains innocent. Yet one result of this successful strategy is that Ai's poems are only secondarily political. Individually they are, as it were, anti-political, not directed toward the world of historical interactions at all; only when we take a number of them together do the poet's choices of speakers accumulate into a political declaration.

Philip Levine's seventh collection is called *The Names of the Lost*—a title that announces his intention to rectify forced silences. The cover photograph shows an endless line of refugees, and the titles of many poems in the book insist on the same passion for collective redemption: "No One Remembers," "Another Life," "On the Murder of Lieutenant Jose del Castillo by the Falangist Bravo Martinez, July 12, 1936." Perhaps the most successful political poem in the book is called "For the Poets of Chile":

Today I called for you,
my death, like a cup
of creamy milk I
could drink in the cold dawn,
I called you to come
down soon. I woke up
thinking of the thousands

in the *futbol* stadium
 of Santiago de Chile,
 and I went cold, shaking
 my head as though
 I could shake it away.
 I thought of the men
 and women who sang
 the songs of their people
 for the last time, I
 thought of the precise
 architecture of a man's wrist
 ground down to powder.
 That night when I fell asleep
 in my study, the false
 deaths and the real blurred
 in my dreams. I called
 out to die, and calling
 woke myself to the empty
 beer can, the cup
 of ashes, my children
 gone in their cars,
 the radio still moaning.
 A year passes, two,
 and still someone must
 stand at the window
 as the night takes hold
 remembering how once
 there were the voices
 of play rising
 from the street,
 and a man or woman
 came home from work
 humming a little tune
 the way a child does
 as he muses over
 his lessons. Someone
 must remember it over
 and over, must bring
 it all home and rinse
 each crushed cell
 in the waters of our lives
 the way a god would.

Victor, who died
 on the third day—
 his song of outrage
 unfinished—and was strung
 up as an example to all,
 Victor left a child,
 a little girl
 who must waken each day
 before her mother
 beside her, and dress
 herself in the clothes
 laid out the night
 before. The house sleeps
 except for her, the floors
 and cupboards cry out
 like dreamers. She goes
 to the table and sets out
 two forks, two spoons, two knives,
 white linen napkins gone
 gray at the edges,
 the bare plates,
 and the tall glasses
 for the milk they must
 drink each morning.

What's peculiar about the opening of this poem is the apparent contradiction between a project of ventriloquial advocacy and a pre-occupation with the poet's own self and situation. The title's "For" is ambiguous; the poem may be a gift to the poets, or a speech on their behalf. The two ways of *speaking for* someone are distinguishable by the meaning of the pronoun "I," as a context establishes it; and here, Levine begins by playing a shell game. "Today I called for you"—this poet called (cried out) on behalf of those poets; or he's speaking in the voice of someone who called for them (demanded their presence, as if by *habaeus corpus*); or he's speaking in their voice to some still-undefined "you." The line is ejected into vacancy, where all the meanings of "call" and "call for" yearn to be realized. When "you" gets its appositive in the next line—"my death"—the question seems settled. We can all too easily imagine one of the poets, imprisoned and tortured beyond endurance, calling for his death "to come / down soon." Yet the following sentence reverses our conviction by making

it clear that this is the North American poet himself. He is only "thinking of the thousands / in the *futbol* stadium"; he isn't one of them.

This opening seems to retreat drastically from the political purpose we deduce so readily from the title. It's just the gringo poet, calling melodramatically for his death, trumpeting his world-weariness, the thousands in the *futbol* stadium merely examples for him of the world gone to hell. If we feel sensitive to the possibility of his condescending to those he speaks for, this blatant egoism strangely disarms our suspicion. Of course this strategy also entails the enormous risk that we may have no faith at all in his advocacy, his ability to see beyond his own walls. How the poem triumphs over that risk is worth studying.

After the first, declamatory sentence, Levine offers just enough details of setting to help us imagine the poet, not only writing, but speaking. The phrases "I woke up" and "and I went cold" can both be taken to describe internal, spiritual events; but they're first of all consistent with a physical situation. The concretizing continuation of each phrase helps: "I woke up / thinking of" (a grander or more abstract word—"aware of," "appalled by"—would destroy the drab realism of the scene); "I went cold, shaking / my head as though / I could shake it away." All of this language works both to describe the scene and to express an attitude. But both the description and the expression are reticent, each function of the language guarded by the other from becoming too fixed. We're not very sure where this is taking place, and the poet's commitment to outrage isn't very definite.

In the next sentence the egoistic frame ("I thought of") pales in the company of the story that the sentence's last phrases, by their sequence, re-enact: "The precise / architecture of a man's wrist / ground down to powder." Already, then, the poet's frank insistence on his own presence and his own feelings is becoming a foil, and so a vehicle, for the more vivid imaginative reality of Chile. The poet's sense of himself initiates our attention, but relinquishes control of it.

This beginning of detachment continues with an odd slip in time. Though the opening of the poem takes place "Today," line 20 continues, "That night . . ." At first—perhaps until we've finished this sentence and the next—we aren't sure whether we've moved backward or forward in time. In fact, these sentences retrace the same

ground as the opening of the poem: the waking, the calling, the poet's surroundings. He goes over the path in more detail this time ("in my study," "woke myself," "the empty / beer can," "the radio still moaning"), but also at a greater distance. In speaking of "the false / deaths and the real," he comes to judge the first sentence of the poem in the expanding context. Egoism becomes capable of its own limits.

This distancing movement accelerates in line 30: "A year passes, two . . ." This middle section of the poem is notable for a kind of canny vagueness: "someone," "a man or woman." It culminates in a conditional prayer: "Rinse / each crushed cell / in the waters of our lives / the way a god would." The vagueness of these twenty lines serves not only as evocative, not simply to pump up the level of usable emotion, but also to prevent us from feeling certain about whether the implied events take place *here* or *there*. Levine's balancing act between the North American and Chilean settings enables him to speak of human conditions in terms that feel genuinely universal without falling into the merely generic.

The chief device of this balancing act is the shifting use of the word *must*, which occurs five times in the poem. In the first instance ("and still someone must / stand at the window . . . remembering") it expresses probability verging on certainty. A dozen lines later ("Someone / must remember it over / and over, must bring / it all home") the word has begun to take on a new insistence: This memorial action is obligatory; the alternative is not unlikely but unthinkable. Though the verbs governed by the auxiliary "must" are almost the same ("must / stand . . . remembering," "must remember . . . , must bring / it all home"), the reiterated but unresolved images effect a complete transition between lines 30 and 50. "Must" is the perfect word to mediate the different selves that Levine needs to project for his poem to work: The man waking among ashes in his study, gradually bringing the reality of Chile home to himself, imagines what "must" be happening in that distant place, the poet writing for the poets of Chile insists on what "must" happen for the struggle not to have been in vain.

The final section begins by seizing firmly on "Victor, who died / on the third day"—the name, the day, and the preceding line about "a god" all suggesting that the poem has reached an apotheosis. Instead of using Victor Jara as a dramatic mouthpiece, Levine has chosen to

set him up—in a way that precisely subverts the *junta's* intention—“as an example to all,” not denying that he’s been silenced but insisting on it.

As if uncomfortable with the static presence of a martyr, though, the poem doesn’t rest on Victor, but instead discovers its real focus of feeling in his surviving daughter. The “little girl / who must waken each day / before her mother” is set before us very plainly: The clarity of her presence dispels the indeterminacy of the middle section of the poem, and the vision achieves this clarity by means of a language of ordinary but uncannily scrutinized detail (“the clothes / laid out the night / before”). The image pivots on yet another “must,” with the added implication of compulsion. By now, “must” has accumulated its full potential weight, suggesting not only the certainty of the vision, but also the terrible rightness of tragedy.

The sentence that introduces Jara’s daughter is followed by a short one about her surroundings. “The house sleeps / except for her” seems to be a metonymy, “the house” standing for the people in the house (such as “her mother”). But in the next clause, “the floors / and the cupboards cry out / like dreamers.” This is not gratuitous surrealism, but a return to the beginning of the poem, to the language of sleeping and crying out. Now, however, the poet is projected into the animated house of the little girl; he has become her setting and witness, not mute, but “crying out” like a Greek chorus. Then the poem insists again on the image of the girl with a powerful anaphora, “two forks, two spoons, two knives” (no longer three), finally returning to the milk that was a metaphor for the poet’s imagined death and now, becoming literal, gathers “the real” death into itself under the command of a final “must.”

The poem’s movement is expansive, the spiral beginning with a tight rotation around the poet’s own dream and reaching centrifugally toward imaginative realization of the plight of another person. This ethical movement is shadowed by the prosodic one: The points where lines and sentences end together (which in most free verse act as this kind of punctuation) define a sequence of sections twelve lines long, seven, ten, twenty, and twenty-four. While each of these sections works itself out, we feel ourselves in the midst of a stream of language, and the stream lengthens its fall each time, the momentum increasing enough to carry us finally beyond ourselves.

The particular kind of expansive movement of “For the Poets of Chile” depends on its *not* being a dramatic monologue. In a dramatic monologue, the speaker seems to be improvising, while the poet stands silently behind the speech with the special responsibilities of constructing and revising. What Levine does instead can be called “lyric” as opposed to “dramatic,” but the point is certainly not that he avoids speaking through a persona, a personality. The poem isn’t monologic in that narrow and perhaps impossible way. Rather, Levine emphasizes the immediacy of his speaking by not beginning with the premise of a voice complacent enough to be projected clear of itself. In fact, the expectations and ambiguities of the opening throw us back with special force on a sense of the poet talking directly, naturally for himself. This disarming, almost ingenuous approach allies him with improvisatory poets like David Antin, and with William Carlos Williams in poems like “The Yachts”; we see the poet as discovering, like a soloist, what he needs to say in the act of saying it.

The differentiation of the voice of the poem, its discovery of its own potential multiplicity, is a point arrived at, not begun from. Such a poem demonstrates how political consciousness arises out of, and is ultimately identical with, imagination. The success of this political poem is finally located not in the case that it advocates—“poetry makes nothing happen,” says Auden—but in the advocate. It changes us not by giving us a completed model to emulate or renounce, but by presenting an unfolding pattern of realization that we accompany and so imitate. An advocate is literally one called to speak. “For the Poets of Chile” incorporates the story of the calling into the act of speaking. It’s as if Levine spent the whole poem becoming ready to write a dramatic monologue.

Unlike a monologue, where the voices move around a stage whose boundaries are static, his poem’s voice is a movement of the self outward. To put it in Bakhtin’s terms, the “ideological becoming of a human being”—a process that need not cease with childhood or adolescence—requires the human being to submit to dis-integration, to the risky business of admitting another voice into the senate of the self.