VOICES: A SELECTION OF POEMS

By

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INTRODUCTION

This thesis is a collection of poems written over the last two and one-half years, a time period roughly corresponding to that during which I have been pursuing my graduate program in creative writing. As such, it represents both my strengths and weaknesses as a poet as I perceive them. Over this period of time I have become more and more conscious of such matters as technique, style, and poetics. As I reviewed my poems for inclusion herein, I began to become aware of aesthetic principles informing my poetry, principles that I have never clearly articulated before now.

Also during this time, I have become interested in trying to write more formally than I have in the past. As a result, many of the poems in this collection make use of forms, both fixed and nonce. I have not by any means abandoned "free verse," but I have been utilizing such formal devices as rhyme and meter a great deal more than when I began to write poetry.

The attempt to compose good formal verse necessarily leads the poet to search for the best examples by recognized masters. Thus I have gained new insights into the tradition of English poetry while trying to determine my place in it. I have spent much time reading and rereading large amounts of poetry of varying quality and style, both in my course work and on my own. My reading has covered such early figures as the Metaphysical poets, Milton, and the Cavalier poets. I have also

read widely in the work of the Romantics, both English and American, in particular Wordsworth and Keats. And I have studied such important modern and contemporary American poets as T.S. Eliot, E.A. Robinson, Theodore Roethke, Donald Justice, A.R. Ammons, and W.D. Snodgrass. All of these poets, and others, have had some effect on my writing, but the more recent have had a more direct influence upon my poems.

Having laid a general background, I would now like to turn to a specific examination of my poetry with regard to my aesthetic principles, my techniques and use of form, my use of language, and my sense of place in the tradition of English poetry.

I tend to hold with T. S. Eliot's doctrine of the impersonality of art as a general philosophic principle. As he puts it, "The poet has, not a 'personality' to express, but a particular medium, which is only a medium and not a personality, in which impressions and experiences combine in peculiar and unexpected ways."[1] The reason that this notion is important to me is that my earliest efforts at writing poetry were purely autobiographical. My first poems were attempts to directly express emotions I was experiencing at the time. These poems are flawed because I could not maintain sufficient detachment to control my materials, and thus the poems held little of interest or value to any reader other than me.

This is not to say that my own emotions (along with ideas, personal observations, bits of philosophy, and other elements which are rooted in my personality) have no place in my poetry. Far from it, for, as Eliot also pointed out, "the poet's mind is in fact a receptacle for storing up numberless feelings, phrases, images, which remain there until all the particles which can unite to form a new compound

are present together."[2] Many of my poems attempt to create imaginary situations for the purpose of illustrating and evoking emotions I have really experienced. One can see an example of this process in my two albas, "Another Perfect Stranger" and "Sunday Morning. Spring." The particular situations described in these poems are imaginary and not autobiographical; however, the emotions evoked are those I have experienced in various relationships. These emotions are not important in themselves, but as raw material for art. And, as Eliot noted, it is not "the intensity of the emotions . . . but the intensity of the artistic process" that matters.[3]

The creation of such imaginary situations involves the creation of a dramatic context for the emotions, observations, and ideas dealt with. As John Ciardi observed, "A good poem has dramatic structure . . . The elements of the poem are, in a real sense, a cast of characters."[4] Even in the most seemingly personal lyric poetry, the poet must maintain conscious control of his materials, his metaphors, images, language, rhythms. The means by which the poet can maintain such control is the use of a mask or mouthpiece--a persona.

The persona is a device that allows the poet to incorporate personal elements into his poem while still maintaining control and distance. W. B. Yeats addressed himself to this idea when he stated, "If we cannot imagine ourselves as different from what we are and assume that second welf, we cannot impose a discipline upon ourselves."[5] This discipline is especially crucial in lyric poetry because, of all the various types of poetry, the lyric demands the greatest economy; it requires that all elements down to the individual words have a clear function, as well as a necessary interrelationship.

I began as a lyric poet and the bulk of my work would probably still be classified as lyric. I believe that, as I have become more conscious that the "I" in my poems is a character--a persona--and not me the person, my lyrics have become better crafted. The persona allows me to manipulate all the elements, both personal and formal, that inform the poem. I have already hinted at how this process works in my two albas; other lyrics here that illustrate this use of a persona include "Sonnet" (a form whose rhetorical structure lends itself well to dramatic analysis), "3 Haiku," and "For Phil." Each of these poems combines real and fictional details which are recounted by various personae who may or may not resemble me, depending upon the needs of the poem. (On a spectrum, the speaker in "For Phil" would resemble me the most, that in "3 Haju" the least). Even the most personal poem here, "Elegy for My Grandfather," shows evidence of the presence of a persona in its selectivity of details, their order, and the voice that renders them, which is neither my speaking nor my prose writing voice.

My increasing cognizance of the role of the persona has also led me to a greater interest in more overtly dramatic poems. This collection contains two dramatic monologues (Lazarus, Five Years Later" and "Villanelle Bleue"), one poem in which the speaker is a dramatic character ("Goya: Don Manuel Osorio de Zuniga"), and several poems into which there is no intrusion of the persona at all (such as "The Elements in Four Epigrams," "Villanelle Urbaine," and "Whistling in the Dark.")

Along with my increased interest in the dramatic level of poetry and in the persona has come a greater interest in writing formal verse. Formal devices such as rhyme, meter, and fixed stanzas are very useful in giving shape and structure to poetic utterances. As John Ciardi had

his Poet say, form has value, "as the kind of experience that goes most deeply into whatever a man is . . . Nothing is more powerfully of man than the fact that he naturally gives off forms and is naturally enclosed by them."[6] Form, then, is inherent in all human endeavors, art chief among them.

Moreover, formal elements can help to emphasize some of the emotional qualities involved in a particular poem. Wordsworth spoke of the interrelationship between meter and words in achieving the poet's goals, and stated that with meter, "there will be found something which will greatly contribute to impart passion to the words, and to effect the complex end which the poet proposes to himself."[7] Two examples of this process in my poetry are "Villanelle Urbaine," in which the fairly regular rhythm and structured repetition reinforce the deadness and monotony with which the poem is concerned, and "Another Perfect Stranger," in which the relatively fast moving rhythm and frequent enjambment underscore the haste and brevity of the relationship depicted therein.

Rhyme can have similar functions. It can serve to enclose units of meaning, as in the quatrains of an English sonnet or in my "Epigrams." Or it can be used to play against enjambed lines, as in "Another Perfect Stranger" in which the run-on lines continually defeat the attempt of rhyme to establish an orderly pattern. This tension reflects the nature of the relationship between the persona and his lover, a brief, disordered affair.

I have another, more personal, reason for trying to write a greater number of formal poems. The challenge of finding words that fit both sound and sense is one I enjoy. In writing rhythmically (and this

applies to free as well as regularly metered verse), I experience what Ciardi called "the joy of that rhythmic act of language."[8] I believe my most successful use of form in this collection is "Sonnet."

It is at the level of language that I believe I still have the furthest to go before I can realize my full potential. This idea may seem paradoxical at first, since the poem exists first as an arrangement of words. However, since many of the poems are experiments with various forms and themes, I have tended to choose words that support my overall strategy, thus perhaps not always using the freshest or most striking language possible. Also, I have tended to draw words from my own vocabulary because these come so naturally to mind.

While I hope to broaden the range of my poetic vocabulary, I believe that my instincts have been essentially sound. As Eliot noted, "It is the poet's business to use the speech which he finds about him, that with which he is most familiar."[9] I have continually tried to avoid what is often labeled "poetic" diction, to write in the idiom of the present day. It is doubtless true that one can find some failures in this regard in this collection, but I feel I am increasingly more sensitive to this matter.

The fact that one tries to write with contemporary diction does not deny the necessity of the poet's awareness of his traditions and his place in them. One link I have with the tradition of English poetry is my use of traditional forms. There are some forms, like the sonnet, that have been and continue to be popular with poets in English. When a reader encounters such a poem he can immediately refer to literary experiences he holds in common with the poet. Thus the poet reflects his awareness of his tradition. Also, many such forms are

associated with particular subject matters and seem to be well suited to particular themes. The sonnet, for instance, is often used for the poetry of love and romance, as I have used it here, although, of course, there have been other uses of the sonnet as well. Another such association is that of the epigram with philosophic subjects. It is suited particularly to short, pointed observations, often of a speculative nature. Hence my own epigrams are included here.

It is in the area of theme that I find myself within a particular tradition of English poetry. Robert Pinsky noted that "we learn many of our attitudes toward language and reality from the past, and that it takes considerable effort by a poet either to understand and apply those attitudes, for his own purposes, or abandon them."[10] I feel that I have inherited attitudes from and take a place in a tradition identified by Pinksy: "Poems in this tradition . . . take place between the conscious mind of which the poem is a part and the oblivious natural universe toward which it yearns."[11] For Pinsky, the modern poet must come to terms with a situation that Pinsky believes first came into consciousness during the Romantic era. The poet is caught between a desire to become part of, to merge with, the natural world and the awareness that he is separate from this world and such a merger means death.

Pinsky found Keats' "Ode to a Nightingale" to be the greatest expression of this dilemma, and traced the development of this line of thought through modernist masters such as Wallace Stevens and William Carlos Williams up to contemporary poets such as A. R. Ammons and Robert Creeley.

It would be impossible to identify any specific sources from which

I may have picked up such ideas. I have read Keats and the other major Romantic poets with great pleasure and have also read many of the modern and contemporary poets Pinksy discussed. In any case, such poems as "For Phil," with its image of men isolated against a stark, snowy background, "Villanelle Urbaine," and "Whistling in the Dark," all depict isolation and the difficulty of connecting with anything or anyone outside the self, a condition that seems to be increasingly prevalent in the contemporary world.

Hyatt Waggoner also found this strain running through specifically American poetry: "The sense of evil, of the darkness of experience, of the alien unknown and uncontrolled in which man is immersed, has been expressed for us in our times and in our terms, by most of the finest modern poets."[12] This pessimistic view is expressed in my poetry, not only with reference to man's relationship to nature, but also his experiences with other people. My albas, "3 Haiku," and "Whistling in the Dark" all exemplify this. However, my poetry also has its optimistic side.

Waggoner, in discussing the Emersonian tradition in American poetry, spoke of "looking for the light within experience, not beyond it, and cultivating modes of apprehension that will permit the poet to see the sparks within the darkness itself."[13] The search for this light can be seen in such poems as "To a Snail on My Front Porch," "The Elements," "Goya," and "Lazarus." "For Phil" contains some of the pessimistic elements, but closes with a qualified affirmation of friendship. "Sonnet" implies that it is possible to make a connection with another person through love, and "Elegy for My Grandfather" implies the possibility of the transmission of values through time. (In fact, the

arrangement of the poems in this collection generally moves from the darker to the lighter, from pessimism to optimism.)

That these two strains should be present along side of each other in my work is no contradiction. Indeed, as Waggoner pointed out, "they are both present to us today, both indeed a part of our own experience."[14] Whatever the case, I should not like for these introductory remarks to stand in the way of my poems or bias a reader toward any preconceived notions. My ideal reader would encounter each poem individually, judge it on its own merits as verse, and then proceed however he will. It is to this reader that this collection is ultimately dedicated.

A NOTE ON PUBLICATION

One poem in this collection, "Alba: Another Perfect Stranger," was published in Kudzu #4 (Jan.-Feb. 1978).

ENDNOTES

[1]T. S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot, ed. Frank Kermode (New York, 1975), p. 42.

[2]Ibid., p. 41.

[3]Ibid.

[4]John Ciardi, "The Environment of Poetry," Dialogue with an Audience (New York, 1963), p. 46.

[5]William Butler Yeats, The Autobiography of William Butler Yeats New York, 1953), p. 285.

[6]John Ciardi, "Poetry as Knowledge: Dialogue with a Realist," Dialogue with an Audience (New York, 1963), p. 56.

[7]William Wordsworth, "Preface to the Second Edition of Lyrical Ballads, English Romantic Writers, ed. David Perkins (New York, 1967), p. 328.

[8]John Ciardi, "The Act of Language," Dialogue with an Audience (New York, 1963), p. 224.

[9]T. S. Eliot, "The Music of Poetry," On Poetry and Poets (New York, 1961), p. 24.

[10]Robert Pinsky, The Situation of Poetry (Princeton, 1976), p. 4.

[11]Ibid., p. 60.

[12]Hyatt Waggoner, American Poets from the Puritans to the Present (Boston, 1968), p. 5.

[13]Ibid., p. 632.

[14]Ibid., p. 633.

THE POEMS

Crow Over the Highway

"deep in the brain, far back"

Driving down the Interstate,
I saw a crow rise, taking flight,
a black hole in the day's blue sky.
A shape in my mind flew up then
and followed that bird in its flight,
looking along the edge of the road,
searching among the stone and the grass
and smears of oil for shiny things,
bright objects, bits of colored cloth,
scraps of glass and metal, chrome
and steel, pieces of old car mirrors.

3 Haiku

Night: the wind blows cold.

1.) It rattles the windowpane.

I turn: you're still gone.

Ten days gone: your voice

2.) echoes in the sparrow's song.

I feed him breadcrumbs.

The wind moves the leaves.

3.) Halves of a yellow-brown leaf

fly past my cold hand.

Alba: Another Perfect Stranger

The sun throws shadows across our faces.
You stir like a cat and turn away.
You murmur a song against the day.
while I, more in love with light, look for traces
of last night's love: the wrinkles in the sheet,
your hair across my chest, a scent
of jasmine, an empty wineglass. I bent
last night, kissed a drop from your lips, and beat
out time with my hands as your hands found my back.
We moved well together, danced to that song
of breath and heartbeat. Even now as long
night fades into day, my hands mark the lack
of beat and still seek to play. Tonight
will find us in other beds; a different song
will move your hips. Fresh drops of wine upon
your lips will spark another's appetite.
You'll turn and sign his name into the night
as another perfect stranger dims the light.

Alba: Sunday Morning. Spring

False dawn is past
and your eyes are closed.
When days comes,
the sun will coax them open,
pouring its honey across your lips.
Waking, you will see
not my eyes but only the designs
papered to the wall, the same patterns
I tried to memorize while you slept.

Villanelle Urbaine

(in memory of E.A.R.)

He stares at the cracked image in the glass.
He scrapes a razor across his face.
He feels his body an inert mass

deadened to feeling. Trying to pass
for human, looking for some sign of grace,
he stares at the cracked image in the glass.

Outside, the rain on the street leaves no trace
of the afternoon's dirt. This night will pass
while he scrapes a razor across his face.

He remembers the nights of smoke and grass,
and whiskey, and blue eyes and collars of lace,
and stars at the cracked image in the glass

that once reflected what he tries to retrace.
The objects of memory now gone under grass,
he scrapes a razor across his face.

The crack in the mirrow creates a slash
on his cheek and forms a fresh scar on his face.
He stares at the cracked image in the glass
and scrapes a razor across his face.

Whistling in the Dark

The night slips in under the windowshade
and finds you before the mirror,
brushing your hair.

A bowl of rosebuds he bought you before he left
sits in its silent corner.
The buds are closed tightly
in upon themselves.

His picture over the bed
is turned to face the wall.

You enter the familiar hallway of this house you shared,
now slightly altered.
The light at the end of the passage is off.

You stand there, hating roses.
You think instead of irises,
open to light.
A burst of yellow flashes in your mind,
but not in your eyes.

You close your eyes.

Villanelle Bleue

I work all day and drink all night.
My hands are hard and veined like dirt.
I won't go out without a fight.

My papa taught me to drink and fight,
to shrug and laugh when I get hurt,
so I work all day and drink all night

and kiss my wife who loves me right
and cleans my clothes and irons my shirts.
And I won't go out without a fight,

in front of a car in the dead of night,
or shot up or knifed while chasing a skirt.
And I'll work every day and drink every night

till the Devil himself appears in the night
and jumps me and catches me by the shirt,
and I still won't go out without a fight.

So don't start too soon on my bed of dirt.
I can take almost any kind of hurt
and keep working all day and drinking all night,
and I damn well won't go out without a fight.

Lazarus, Five Years Later

"And they saw how their vague and inaccurate
life made room for him once more." Rilke,
"The Raising of Lazarus"

Another round here! Well, as I was saying,
when I first began to wake I thought my journey
upward had ended. My eyes were still bleary
from four days sleep, and I took the light
at the end of the cave for my destination.
Empty yet? No? So... I heard voices
crying, "Lord, is he coming?" and I cried,
"Lord! I am here!" I tore off the bandages,
stood up, and stumbled toward the sounds.
Yes, the light was blinding after the dark of the cave.
When my eyes cleared, I saw my neighbors
and a group of ten or twelve strangers
standing around a man they called Lord.
My legs failed then and I had to be carried.
Where? Why, back home, of course, to my wife.
Glad to have me back? I suppose so,
although the smell of the cave that clung to me
for several days afterward bothered her a little,
I think. As for the one they called Lord,
I never saw him again, but I heard
the Romans executed him later. No, I never found out why.
What will happen to me? I don't know,
but I never have been able to forget the smell of that cave.
Another cup?

The Elements in Four Epigrams

1. A bag of water bursts and we are born.
   Our ancestors crawled from the ocean,
   While we carry our water within, always in motion.
   Life begins and ends where bodies from water are torn.

2. We come to life by sucking air for breath.
   At birth the doctor's slap
   Wakes us from our nine month nap.
   Fair oxygen, like a lover,
   We live for you; without you we smother,
   And your every departure is a little death.

3. In love or anger our nerve ends take fire.
   Passion inflamed within the heart
   Begins to consume from the very start,
   And all too soon leaves a burnt-out shell.
   Still, it's better to burn and burn well
   Than live without passion on an icy pyre.

4. We are born into air from a watery birth.
   Fire takes us slowly, consuming.
   The body withers, gravity subsuming,
   Till we make our beds in the welcoming earth.

Goya: "Don Manuel Osorio de Zuniga"

(for Amanda and Caitlin)

How to begin...

This stiff little aristocrat
standing pensively holding a string
attached to a black and white magpie.
The bird posed as formally
as a boy, holding
the painter's card in its beak.

All very pretty, but
it tells us nothing.
Where, in all this, is Goya?
But wait. Look in the corner
next to the boy's feet:
three cats are crouching ready to spring,
their eyes on the bird.
Light radiates from their eyes
and forms a halo, almost,
around the boy's head.

No need to look at the card.
The cats' eyes say it:
Goya has been here.

To a Snail on My Front Porch

(for Lisa)

Following a track that only you see,
you move in a slow, straight line.
You leave a glistening wake behind
as you travel, seemingly free
of your watery heritage. What ocean
do you see now? Even as I ask,
you move away with a swimming motion
across the ship-gray surface, out of my grasp.

Elegy for my Grandfather

(T.E.D. 1908-1975)

Proem: His Pipe

It lies empty now,
cool and smokeless.
The fires that he lit and relit
through fifty years have left
only the memory of smoke and heat
in fine grey ash that coats the bowl.
If you hold the pipe close
you can still smell his life.

1. Printing

A printer all your life,
you knew words down to the bone.
The alphabet lay open before you,
and each letter alone in its tray,
until you brought them together.
Your art consisted in this:
this articulation of letters
into a skeleton of meaning.

You were the original poet:
Letter by letter,
you daily recreated the language.

2. Tools

Your tools hang in their places still,
in neat rows along the workshop wall,
as if waiting for you to return
and pick one out.
I know the names of some:
plane, handsaw, jigsaw,
T-square, and, in the middle of the room,
the power saw that frightened
and attracted me most.

So much of you remains in what you built.
Are my pen and typewriter adequate tools?
Can words on paper match what you built in wood?

3. Angling

I save your best trick for last: fishing.
For you, it was no metaphor.
You used lines and hooks
to catch real fish: bass and bream and perch.
Water held a deep mystery for you,
but it was no symbol.
I never had your patience for sitting
and waiting for a bite.

I sit and wait now, though,
smoking a pipe like you always did,
waiting for my own lines to make a catch.

Epitaph

Earth, take in this fisherman;
his poles are laid aside.
Let him lie in his earthen bed,
his tools to be used by younger hands.

Let those hands create in wood
objects that reflect his craft.
And let the printer's art sustain
these words he might have understood.

For Phil

The rain fell through the afternoon
and turned to snow last night.
Today the ground is hard and tight.
An ice cocoon is wrapped around
each leaf. The sun was out by noon,
and birds walk carefully over frozen ground.

One night on such a surface, you and I,
stoned, made our careful way across
a field, sliding from to house.
"It's like a tooth," you said. Nervously we sang.
Our voices carried under the low sky
and echoed off the ground and rang.

That field thawed out five years ago
and my yard, too, will green again.
You live farther away. The freezing rain
will come again but now we have our wives
to hold and keep us warm against the snow.
Beyond all that something survives:

Beneath the frozen ground no green heart pines,
yet grass will still return. Even my buried heart
has learned to reach and cling to what it finds.

Sonnet

(for V.)

The way your slip lies folded on the chair,
neat, and smooth as your hand, and yet still seems
so casually placed, dropped from the air
as it were, or carried by the wind: dreams
are made of less. Disrobing is an art
that you've learned well. I watch you drop your shoes
and see you roll your stockings down. I start
to tremble when your dress falls. And yet I'd choose
your dressing as the greater art. Your hands
smooth your stockings and caress your slip.
And when, half through, you cross your arms and stand,
I love nothing more than the touch of slip on hip.
In matters of dress you're mistress each way,
so I take pleasure twice: both night and day.

Sonata

(for V.)

"Auf welchem Instrument sind wir gespannt?" Rilke.

I don't believe in Muses, of course,
but how else explain you? Perhaps
I'm a tautly wound metal string
and you the hammer that makes it ring.

Or better: we're two strings struck at once,
apart, different notes of dissimilar pitch,
but sounded as one a harmonious tone
with a beauty surpassing each note alone.

And so, till the day comes when we are unstrung,
let us ring here, an interval, resonant, clear.
Together our echoes approach the sublime
and, recorded by me, may outlast our time.

Envoi

Go now, verses,
on your own.
With many voices,
in different tones,
you speak my art,
such as it is.
Your birth was hard,
but it gave me ease.

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