

THE VOICE OF THE OTHER AS MUSE AND MUSIC MAKER

In his visionary classic, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, William Blake eludes the influence of Milton and Dante by undermining their theological tropes with the heretical conceit that wisdom emanates from, of all places, Hell. Rather than following the traditionally sublime avenue from Hades to heaven, like Dante and Milton, Blake focuses in a more radical, antinomian way on mystical forces he called “energetic creators,” entities that exist in Hell where they create what he called “memorable fancy” in defiance of the “mind-forged manacles” of conventional morality and religion. One of his most famous aphorisms from Blake’s “energetic” litany in his *Proverbs from Hell* is his assertion that “the most sublime act is to set another before you.” This precept testifies to the transformative power of both sympathy and empathy. Yet, it also strikes terror in its challenge to encounter difference and strangeness in the other—a strangeness that incites a fear of losing one’s self in someone else. Blake’s proverb echoes throughout history as both a religious and humanistic precept, finding its most celebrated expression in Walt Whitman’s *Song of Myself* in which he “yawps” that “every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.” Whitman’s embrace of the other as a transpersonal self populated his single being, he maintained, with what he called “multitudes.” The subject of the other or others became what he called a “main thing,” precisely what he abjured “poets to come” in his poem by that title to write about.

While there are hundreds of traditional and contemporary poems that endure as icons of alterity, I’d like to discuss just three as strong contemporary examples, beginning first, however, with a short email exchange I had with friend and fellow poet, Bill Tremblay, on the dangers of objectifying as opposed to setting another before you, or subjectifying. I quoted the same “proverb” by Blake to Bill as the one

I've quoted above, to which Bill responded with the following brilliant response, reminding me of how essential the other is as a subject for subjectifying:

Blake's project is to re-subjectify what has formerly been objectified by use of the imagination in such a way as to create compassion. That's why I used Rilke's "Archaic Torso of Apollo" as an example. Rilke shows us line by line in his sonnet how a process of re-subjectifying actually works. It is the light that shines out of the marble.

But what does subjectifying have to do with technique and craft you might ask? The answer is simply everything, for subjectifying inspires spare, transformative expression with a sound all its own—a verbal music we don't know we know until we find it within us like a lovesick troubadour or shaman or beloved sitting at our kitchen table talking to him or herself. By setting another before you, whether it be an object or person, and then crossing over to that person or thing, allows you as the poet to escape into that person or thing in which a most generous muse imparts what Robert Frost called "the sound of sense"—that musical, mystical diction that conveys as much, if not more, between the lines as in the lines. Here's an example of this verbal magic from Frost's lengthy monologue, "A Servant To Servants":

With a houseful of hungry men to feed
I guess you'd find.... It seems to me
I can't express my feelings any more
Than I can raise my voice or want to lift
My hand (oh, I can lift it when I have to).
Did ever you feel so? I hope you never.

Frost's speaker appears to be talking as much to himself as he does to his fellow servants in this poem. Yankee speech hangs in the air throughout this raw apostrophe in which Frost sustains what Dan Chiasson in a recent review of Frost's letters in *The New York Review of Books* describes as "the primal

elements...that “counting out” and meaning-making by selection...his prosody in action.” Frost “dreamed,” Chiasson continues, “of sentences stripped of their words, pared down to their ‘sentence sounds,’ those “brute tones of our human throat that may once have been all our meaning.’ What Chiasson calls Frost’s “prosody in action.”

So, what then is the magic in the poet’s ventriloquizing another? In transforming herself into a multitude? In divining the disinterested cypher in the clutch of what John Keats called “uncertainty, mystery, doubt” in his definition of “negative capability” that complicates the poet sublimely, freeing her from the gravity of herself alone via the imaginative act of “subjectifying” Assignments follow these questions rather than prescriptive answers. What does the stone cry out? What does the flower sing? What does the cloud preach? What does the prisoner think? What does the caged panther feel? Did Rilke know his poem “Archaic Torso of Apollo” was destined to become a sonnet? I doubt it. He found its form after scribbling it first in his notebook, maybe even in prose first. It’s always the same with good poems. The music arrives naturally in the poet’s deep dive into her embryonic subject. An invisible musician waits for the words. A spiritual force weds content to sound. You witness this marriage between the aural and the oral immediately in Rilke’s subjectification of Apollo’s statue:

We will never know his magnificent head,
the ebb and flow of his youth -
an orchard of ripening fruit,
yet his fire has not diminished,

incandescent light radiates
from his torso, and in the curve
of his loins, a smile turns
towards the centre of creation.

Or else this body would be disfigured -
a lump of rock with no vision,
unable to glisten like a lion's mane.

It would not burst out of its skin
like a star: for its searing gaze
penetrates your soul, the way you live.

Or in these profoundly simple lines from Herbert Mason's translation of Gilgamesh:

All that is left to one who grieves is convalescence,/ No change of heart or spiritual
conversion,/ For the heart has changed and the spirit has converted/ To a thing that
sees how much it cost to lose a friend it loved.

Subjectify, subjectify.

One of the most celebrated American poems that is as instructive for writers as it is revelatory in its speaker's traverse from self to other is Elizabeth Bishop's poem "In The Waiting Room." While waiting for her Aunt Consuelo, Bishop overhears her cry out in pain from the dentist chair—a cry that triggers Bishop's first "strange" epiphany. This precocious experience terrifies her in a sudden episode of depersonalization in which she sees her six-year-old self transmogrify into her aunt, whom she describes as "a foolish timid woman." In a scene that sounds almost like science fiction, Bishop experiences herself as other in the ironic host of her aunt, but rather than feel "foolish" and "timid" she perceives herself as other, as "one of them too," as if "one of them" were as strange and different as an alien. She gains what Philip Larkin calls in his poem "Talking in Bed" a "unique distance from isolation."

What took me
completely by surprise
was that it was me:
my voice, in my mouth.
Without thinking at all
I was my foolish aunt,
I--we--were falling, falling,

our eyes glued to the cover
of the National Geographic,
February, 1918.

I said to myself: three days
and you'll be seven years old.
I was saying it to stop
the sensation of falling off
the round, turning world.
into cold, blue-black space.
But I felt: you are an I,
you are an Elizabeth,
you are one of them.
Why should you be one, too?
I scarcely dared to look
to see what it was I was.
I gave a sidelong glance
--I couldn't look any higher--
at shadowy gray knees,
trousers and skirts and boots
and different pairs of hands
lying under the lamps.
I knew that nothing stranger
had ever happened, that nothing
stranger could ever happen.

Why should I be my aunt,
or me, or anyone?
What similarities--
boots, hands, the family voice
I felt in my throat, or even
the National Geographic
and those awful hanging breasts--
held us all together
or made us all just one?
How--I didn't know any
word for it--how "unlikely"...
How had I come to be here,
like them, and overhear
a cry of pain that could have
got loud and worse but hadn't?

In her brief, frightening moment of depersonalization, Bishop perceives herself as both other and herself with a parallax vision that she can't sustain for long. Her intensely close proximity to "cold, blue-black space" afflicts her with a "sensation" of "falling off the round turning world" in this terrifying *I thou* encounter with herself as other in the person of herself *and* her aunt. She realizes in the course of this self-revealing, self-delighting poem that the voices of the others in the poem—her Aunt Consuelo, the African matron, Osa and Martin Johnson—who emerge so spontaneously, are also her muses imparting not only the poem's content, but the poem's sonic velocity, as well, in perfect iambic trimeter.

The next poem I'd like to discuss as an iconic example of transpersonal utterance is James Wright's "Hook." Like Bishop's "In the Waiting Room" it shoots down the page as a transcription of the voice Wright hears internally as other in the person of "a young Sioux."

Hook

I was only a young man
 In those days. On that evening
 The cold was so God damned
 Bitter there was nothing.
 Nothing. I was in trouble
 With a woman, and there was nothing
 There but me and dead snow.

I stood on the street corner
 In Minneapolis, lashed
 This way and that.
 Wind rose from some pit,
 Hunting me.
 Another bus to Saint Paul
 Would arrive in three hours,
 If I was lucky.

Then the young Sioux
Loomed beside me, his scars
Were just my age.

Ain't got no bus here
A long time, he said.
You got enough money
To get home on?

What did they do
To your hand? I answered.

He raised up his hook into the terrible starlight
And slashed the wind.
Oh, that? he said.
I had a bad time with a woman. Here,
You take this.

Did you ever feel a man hold
Sixty-five cents
In a hook,
And place it
Gently
In your freezing hand?

I took it.
It wasn't the money I needed.
But I took it.

The first draft of this was originally embedded in a longer poem that included the first draft of "To A Blossoming Pear Tree." Both poems convey a radical empathic interaction between Wright and unlikely destitute others, but Wright wisely realized that both "the Sioux" in "Hook" and the gay stranger in "To a Blossoming Pear Tree" needed their own stages. In "Hook," Wright exhibits his social genius for divining the reverse current of giving. By taking the sixty-five cents that "the Sioux"

offers him after Wright asks him “What did they do to your hand?”, Wright, in his signature cathartic way that one sees also in such poems as “St Judas,” “The Minneapolis Poem,” “To the Muse,” “At the Executed Murder’s Grave,” and “In Response to a Rumor That the Oldest Whorehouse in Wheeling, West Virginia Has Been Condemned,” grasps the ironic calculus of receiving by taking, despite his own lack of need. The intangible human currency this act transacts is priceless.

The last poem I’d like to discuss in which the speaker becomes a multitude in one person via her poetic passport of accurate empathy and in which the poet discovers the poems’ form in the voice of the other is Lucille Clifton’s “Jasper Texas 1998”.

jasper texas 1998

for j. byrd

i am a man's head hunched in the road.
i was chosen to speak by the members
of my body. the arm as it pulled away
pointed toward me, the hand opened once
and was gone.

why and why and why
should i call a white man brother?
who is the human in this place,
the thing that is dragged or the dragger?
what does my daughter say?

the sun is a blister overhead.
if i were alive i could not bear it.
the townsfolk sing we shall overcome
while hope bleeds slowly from my mouth
into the dirt that covers us all.
i am done with this dust. i am done.

Clifton not only crosses over to the other side in the process of crossing over to the other, James Byrd, in this poem, she channels Byrd’s voice as well in an act of

witnessing to the horror of his murder. This was not a new experience for Lucille, crossing over to the afterworld, that is. She often engaged in seances to commune with her mother, Thelma, who died when she was only 44. I asked her about this in the last interview she did three weeks before she died in 2010 on the same day her mother died, February 13th. Here's part of our exchange:

CD: You must have missed her terribly.

LC: Oh, my! We were sitting up on New Year's Eve. We had a piano, which was unusual, and I would sit there trying to play on New Year's Eve. I've never had a New Year's Eve when I didn't cry.

CD: Did she die on New Year's Eve?

LC: No. It was February, Friday the 13th, whatever year. (Note from CD: Lucille herself died on this day, 2010.)

CD: It was 1959. But there was something about ...

LC: Something about another year she's not going to be ... she's not coming back. While it's the beginning of a lot of stuff--New Year's Eve--it's not the beginning for others.

CD: When you started hearing her voice, receiving those poems in the ones who talk, what was that like for you, because it was ... your mother with whom you were communicating?

LC: You hesitated to say it was my mother.

CD: I did.

LC: But it was my mother.

Although Clifton isn't channeling James Byrd in her poem "Jasper Texas" via the Ouija board, which she liked to use in channeling her mother, she is nonetheless crossing over to him, conjuring both powerful poetic expression and an effective free

verse form that's both hers and Byrd's, with her signature lower case denoting universality throughout the poem. Lucille's voice conflates with Byrd's spontaneously. I'm not sure how long Clifton worked on this poem but my suspicion is it emerged in need of no revision in her first draft. So, there is a vatic quality to poems in which the speaker crosses over. The muse's voice is multifarious and catholic. Clifton's poem speaks with the resonance and character of utterance. I'm sure she would say, like her close friend, Ruth Stone, that she didn't write it.

There are, of course, in addition to the poems above myriad other contemporary poems that focus on the electric other for their sublime subject matter. Here is a very partial list of poets whose poems contain transpersonal speakers who take the risk of encountering strange others in the paradoxical, sublime practice of discovering sameness behind difference: Larry Levis ("The Oldest Living Thing in L.A." "Elegy With A Chimney Sweep Falling Inside It"), Terrance Hayes ("American Sonnet For Wanda C"), Robert Hayden ("Those Winter Sundays"), Natasha Trethewey ("Enlightenment," "The Age of Reason"), Bruce Smith ("Lewisburg"), Philip Levine ("The Mercy"), Marilyn Nelson ("A Wreath for Emmett Till"), Patricia Smith ("Skinhead"), Bianca Stone ("Mobius Strip Club of Grief"), Denise Duhamel ("Ego"), Dennis Nurkse ("Introit and Fugue"), Galway Kinnell ("The Avenue Bering The Initial of Christ Into The New World"), Carl Dennis ("The God Who Loves You"), Ross Gay ("Ending The Estrangement"), Adrienne Rich (*An Atlas Of A Difficult World*), Frank Bidart ("Ellen West"), Jane Hirshfield ("For What Binds Us"), Bob Dylan ("The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll"), Thomas Lux ("Pedestrian"), Li-Young Lee ("The Undressing"), Ruth Stone ("1941"), Brigit Pageen Kelly ("Song"), D.A. Powell ([because I were ready before destruction. bearing the sign of his affliction]), David Tomas Martinez ("The Only Mexican"), Peter Everwine ("Elegiac Fragments"), Sydney Lea ("My Wife's Back") Jill Allyn Rosser ("As If"), (Lucille Clifton ("john"), Deborah Digges ("Tombs of the Muses"), Joy Harjo

(“Conflict Resolution For Holy Beings”), Jericho Brown (Romans 12,1), Allen Ginsburg (“Kaddish”), Denise Duhamel (“How Deep It Goes”), Ilya Kaminsky (“Deaf Republic”), Carolyn Forché (“The Boatman”), Martin Espada (“Alabanza, “In Praise of Local 100”), Bill Trembley (*Walks Along The Ditch*), Robin Behn (“In That Year”), Carolyn Forché (“The Boatman”), Robert Hayden (“Those Winter Sundays”), Yusef Komunyakaa (“Facing It”).

In addition to this American list, myriad international examples need to be included also. I would suggest reading Poetry International which the poet Ilya Kaminsky edited for several years as a valuable resource of contemporary international voices.

All poets write, whether consciously or unconsciously, to be translated into languages that may be vastly different from their own and in forms that are also vastly different. So how have such ancient poems and books of poetry as *Gilgamesh*, *The Odyssey*, *The Divine Comedy*, *Song of Songs*, *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, the *Tao Te Ching*, along with hundreds of others, survived in foreign languages if not by betraying their sources as an “other” or “others,” whether animate or inanimate, who tapped into a universal expression behind each of their native languages? In transcriptions that “the other” dictated in his or her paradoxical human capacity as a “multitude” to the singular poet? Whose transpersonal muse provided a verbal tool box that was replete with figurative instruments, ancient “present” voices, generous revelations, self-instructive forms, and ironic truth?

Addendum:

Ars Poetica As Craft Lecture

O give me a poem
Where the anapests roam
And the dactyls and iambs do play,
Where never is heard a superfluous word
And the lines always mean more than they say.