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The Voice of the Text

'Imaginative literature is about listening
to a voice.' (Alvarez 2005: 17)

In an essay entitled 'A Voice', the author Barry Lopez describes his first apprehension of the voices of others. In his case - a young man aspiring to be a writer - these others were everyone not white, middle-class, Catholic American men. Only after listening to and properly hearing the voices of people outside of his cultural boundaries, claims Lopez, did he discover his own voice. Understanding that his voice was not the only voice, that his truth was not the one truth, enabled him to find freedom as a writer:

> As long as it took for me to see that a writer's voice had to grow out of his own knowledge and desire, that it could not rise legitimately out of the privilege of race or gender or social rank, so did it take time to grasp the depth of cruelty inflicted upon all of us the moment voices are silenced, when for prejudicial reasons people are told their stories are not valuable, not useful. (Lopez 1999: 13)

As far as I know Lopez, like many inspiring authors, has not set out to be inspirational or instructive, and his advice for aspiring writers is almost incidental in his essays. A man travelling beside him on a plane trip asks him for advice for his daughter, who wishes to become a writer. Tell her three things, says Lopez: tell her to read, to discover what she truly believes, and to get away from the familiar, to travel (Lopez 1999: 15). Advice number two is for the daughter to discover her beliefs, and then to speak to us from within those beliefs, to become someone. If she speaks her beliefs, the implication is clear, we will listen, we will pay attention. We will want to hear because it will be her true and unique voice.

Brenda Ueland tells us that 'the creative impulse is quiet, quiet. It sees, it feels, it quietly hears; and *now*, in the *present*' (Ueland 1997: 52). If this is the case, then that creative impulse is responding to a voice. If it hears, then it must be listening to a distinctive, recognisable voice, and reacting accordingly, by converting that voice into words on a page.

In the collection where 'A Voice' is the introductory essay, *About This Life: journeys on the threshold of memory*, Lopez is frequently listening to the voices of others, then allowing those voices to speak on the page; in much of this collection they appear almost unmediated. But I don't mean he is only rendering the literal voices of others (though he also does that at times). For instance in the short story, 'Murder', a pregnant young woman approaches the narrator, a stranger, at a remote service station in Utah, gets into his car and then casually asks him to kill her husband:

> 'See that woman over there,' [says the woman] 'Her sister's gonna have his kid too. I'd kill him myself, but I can't. I'd screw up. He'd beat me up so bad, I'd lose the baby.'
> I was afraid to say anything, make any movement. Her voice edged on hysteria, on laughter.
> After a few moments of my silence her hand went to the door handle. 'If you want to do it, no one would know. You could throw the gun away. I wouldn't say anything. I don't even know your name.'
> When the stillness hung on she said, 'Well forget it. Just forget it. Forget I even got in here.' She got out, closed the door firmly, and walked away, reaching across to her right temple to sweep her blonde hair off her face, a movement that carried her across the sunlit lot …. (Lopez 1999: 253)

The characters are unremarked upon, the narrator's presence is a transparent film, he appears not to be judging the woman he encounters, nor the place he is in. This invisibility also applies to the author's voice, one which he has explained comes from listening to others. Therefore, on a simple structural level (because the piece is narrated from a particular point of view, which represents a clear narrative choice by the author) and from a not so clear other level - for which there may not be a word, but which represents a combination of romantic, individualistic, expressive and possibly other, mysterious, views about authorship - the work defines itself, asserts its distinctive voice, the voice of this text. In this particular story it is literally Lopez's voice and his story, being a short memory piece, however it is refined beyond the point of memoir. What is remarkable about the voice of this text is its ability to make judgments without appearing to do so; the narrative voice and the authorial voice conspire - almost whispering together - to indicate that this woman is both appealing and deranged. No one ever tells us that. The voices that work on two levels at once guide our view of the unnamed yet unforgettable woman, as she walks away across the lot to her own car, reaching across to her right temple to sweep her blonde hair off her face - a gesture that seems to define her in one hit - at the same time as they allow us to feel the narrator's silent apprehension ('I was afraid to say anything, make any movement. Her voice edged on hysteria, on laughter'). The other distinctive aspect of this text - of this conspiracy of voices - is its ability to convince us, to make us believe in the story completely. Of course we can have no real idea if it happened or not, nor do we care. The truth of the text is all that matters.

Something similar, though technically quite different, appears in the story of Joan Didion's famous piece of journalism, *Slouching towards Bethlehem*. Here the voice is arguably more contrived but appears as authentic. This illusion relies on a seamless blend of narrative 'objectivity' and authorial

subjectivity, which leaves the reader feeling at once profoundly manipulated and deeply enlightened. Out at Sausalito one afternoon where the Grateful Dead are rehearsing, the narrator talks to some girls hanging around the band:

> I ask a couple of the girls what they do.
> 'I just kind of come out here a lot,' one of them says.
> 'I just sort of know the Dead,' the other says.
> The one who just sort of knows the Dead starts cutting up a loaf of French bread on the piano bench. (Didion 2001: 77)

Slouching Toward Bethlehem is full of these little conversations: the narrative voice so dry it almost evaporates, a tone both affectionate and derisory, the dialogue mediated and manipulated so that the characters have a textual life far beyond any they might have had in real life. At the end of the essay Didion offers a conversation with a five-year-old called Susan about her school friends, a conversation in which the child dismisses the stupid questions of adults: '"Lia," Susan says, "is not in High Kindergarten".' Inserting the tag 'Susan says' in that brief sentence constructs the wearied tone of the child's words and thus the impression that this life has made her vastly older than her years, all of which is so necessary to the essay's argument (Didion 2001: 109).

In the work of author Gerald Murnane the mind and the voice appear to work as one: if he is not quite literally speaking his mind, he is literally writing it. He creates the voice of the work by allowing the sentences on the page to reflect as near as possible those running through his head, and this technique is especially apparent in the piece 'Stream System', which I call a 'piece' as it seems to be equally memoir *and* story. It is almost a very sophisticated form of word association, building to a picture of an obsessive imagination, allowing us direct access to the way a creative mind operates. In this sense 'Stream System', like much of Murnane's work, is a map of the mind. Not surprisingly, actual maps are vital in Murnane's work (in this case it is the Melways street directory of suburban Melbourne). Natalie Goldberg recommends writing exercises to 'burn through to first thoughts, to the place where energy is unobstructed by social politeness or the internal censor, to the place where you are writing what your mind actually sees and feels, not what it *thinks* it should see or feel' (Goldberg 1986: 8). While he hardly undertakes mere writing exercises, Murnane, I'd suggest, does exactly this: at least, he writes what his mind *appears* to see and feel, since it must be impossible to evade the censor/critic/editor entirely. Elsewhere, Goldberg states: 'Everything I say as a teacher is ultimately aimed at people trusting their own voice and writing from it' (Goldberg 1986: 155).

Of course, in all these instances I have cited, the voice is the first person, and that is a major factor in why they work. First person narrative is the key to making these texts so compelling. So does establishing the voice of the text simply mean finding the correct perspective for the narrative, the correct narrative voice? I believe not.

The grain of the voice

It might be useful first to try and define what voice is. In an essay on the

singing voice Roland Barthes identifies something called the grain of the voice, in which he finds a 'dual posture, a dual production, of language and of music' (Barthes 1990: 294). Borrowing terminology from Julia Kristeva, Barthes uses a twofold opposition to define the grain - the pheno-song and the geno-song - two elements within the singing voice that he hears in certain classical vocalists. The pheno-song denotes what I will simplify as all the technical aspects of singing (from the rules of the genre, to the style of interpretation); the geno-song denotes the very 'singing and speaking voice, the space where significations germinate'. The Russian cantor, suggests Barthes, contains this grain, contains both geno-song and pheno-song. His voice is not personal, it expresses nothing of the cantor himself, yet at the same time it is individual: above all, it comes from deep down in the cavities, way beyond the mere lungs, from the muscles, the membranes, the cartilages. The grain has us 'hear a body', a 'body speaking its mother tongue' (Barthes 1990: 295).

Al Alvarez reminds us of this apt line in the novel *The Ghost Writer*, by Philip Roth: 'Voice … is something that begins at around the back of the knees and reaches well above the head' (Alvarez 2005: 23). Here voice is a physical as well as an emotional and intellectual one. This captures perfectly the two elements of voice that I mentioned earlier, the narrative voice determined by the structural, cultural, dramatic requirements of the story, and the voice that comes from the cartilages (behind the knees) from the throat, from the membranes, up through the brain and out through the bone of the skull.

There is, therefore, a word for the voice that complements narrative voice, which represents those mysterious views about authorship I mentioned earlier in relation to the Lopez story: the *embodied* voice.

Voice Lost. Voice Found.

I am not talking about the voice that many teachers of creative writing believe needs to be opened up through meditation, or writing morning pages, or free writing. Again, I'm referring to the voice of the text. Writers frequently talk of stripping away, reducing prose to its essentials, to discover this voice. The journalist Ross Campbell, who wrote splendid humorous columns for Sydney newspapers, explained that his distinctive voice was achieved by going through drafts to cut out adjectives and adverbs (in Foster 1991: 45). Rudyard Kipling was reportedly more ruthless: he spoke of 'blacking out the bits he was 'most proud of' (Alvarez 2005: 37).

If finding your voice as a writer is so fundamental, what happens when we literally do it, when we speak our words aloud? Workshopping classes often require students to read their work aloud. Rewriting - paring down, pruning, interrogating every word, every punctuation point, every pause - often begins here. How many students discover themselves embarrassed or dismayed by what they've written when they read their work aloud? Read it aloud, they are urged, even if it's only to yourself in the quiet of your room. But read it aloud to hear what you've said. And if in reading it aloud to a class it sounds confusing, clumsy, pretentious or plain boring, they quickly appreciate the fact that if it sounds that way to them, then it's likely to sound that way to the rest of their readers too.

But there is another question buried here, one that is rarely confronted by writers and teachers of writing. If we need to find our voice, then this implies that we have lost it. If that is the case, at what point did that happen? And why? Alvarez offers a neat answer to this: part of growing up and becoming an adult involves trying out other people's personalities. As children learn via imitation, they grow to develop an unconscious imitative learning style, which means we all try out voices until we mature. We lose our voices, are silenced, as a part of the process of growing up. Soon we discover soul mates, like-minded friends. Then we fall in love with another personality, we recognise Ms/Mr Right (Alvarez 2005: 25-6).

Translated into writing, this means we try out writers we like, we imitate them, we fall in love with them. (Alvarez doesn't say this, but perhaps connecting with another author is like finding Ms or Mr Write.) It is a process that describes the transition from innocence, via the fall, to knowledge and understanding. Alvarez quotes Austrian philosopher, poet and critic Karl Kraus who says: 'My language is the universal whore whom I have to make into a virgin.' Language, Alvarez explains, is a whore because left to itself it turns the 'same tired old tricks with everyone' and to 'restore its virginity' you have to strip away the fake and fancy clothes such as clichés and excesses (Alvarez 2005: 37).

Perhaps, then, the task of the writer is to restore the innocence of language, to reclaim paradise lush with words, phrases, images, before the serpent began whispering that sly cliché into Eve's ear to convince her she would become possessed of knowledge. *I write because I do not know* is something we hear often from authors. David Malouf said much the same at a recent seminar in Sydney. 'Writers understand almost nothing,' he said, 'it is why they write' (Malouf 2006).

Writing from ignorance is writing from innocence, that lost state we must find and reclaim if we are to convince our readers that we are worth listening to, that we have something to say. Knowing too much can be dangerous. 'If you think too hard about how to kiss someone, you are bound to make a mess of it,' says Terry Eagleton, cautioning against the dangers of over-theorising (Eagleton 1990: 27). If you strain too hard to say something, to explain to your readers, it will show. If innocence has been smothered by too much knowledge, the work will be vitiated. Intimacy will vanish. There will be no kiss between author and reader. The author will not give good tongue (my topic here is voice, after all).

Encouraging raw talent, though, has its hazards in this respect. Glenda Adams describes a good example of this: a natural, artless and convincing voice encountered in letters from a friend is killed off after she suggests that the friend consider creative writing, that she write a book. The subsequent opening chapters the friend produces are flat, lacking in rhythm and vivid imagery; the emerging author, the one whom Adams had encouraged, has lost her voice. It's not as simple as the diminishment of style, but more than that, the banishment of the self, the disappearance of the voice in pursuit of the self-conscious ideal of 'Writing a Book' (Adams 2002: 37). Or, as Eagleton might have put it, she had thought too hard about how to kiss and had made a mess of it.

The birth of the reader

I am, as always, interested in the role of the reader in the writing process. You find your own voice as a writer when you become your own reader. Is this anything more mysterious than simply becoming your own critic and editor? Although that as we all know is not as easy as it sounds. How to hear what you've just written that morning or the previous week? How to read what you've read five, ten or dozens of times over? For we are never reading the words we have written, we are only re-reading them. We bring a lapsarian knowledge to our writing, always. We can never be innocent readers of our own work.

I believe it is more fundamental than merely acquiring editing skills. In his essay, 'St Augustine's Computer', Alberto Manguel discusses the famous moment in Augustine's *Confessions* when the author encountered the scholar, now saint, Ambrose, in his cell in Milan 'reading silently'. This was astonishing for Augustine and other scholar-readers of the time, as reading out loud was the norm. Not only that, Augustine believed that the full comprehension of a text was only possible if the words were spoken. And in reading the scriptures, 'the reader had literally to breathe life into a text, to fill the created space with living language' (Manguel 2000: 258). Ambrose knew what we think theory only articulated for us 40 or 50 years ago, that 'every reader creates, when reading, an imaginary space', and the medium that reveals it or contains it is irrelevant (it may be a manuscript, a book or a computer) for the actual reading space is that place in the reader's mind (Manguel 2000: 261).

Augustine spoke of devouring or savouring a text (Manguel 2000: 263), using the very gastronomical imagery that we are accustomed to: fast readers *devour* books, we *consume* the text. But consumption for us (maybe also for devout readers of sacred texts) never leads to satiation, nor to depletion of the text: like an ever-present feast, the text is always there to be consumed, to be re-read. Indeed, Vladimir Nabokov argues that we never read a book anyway, we can only ever re-read it, since it's impossible to take in a written text at first glance, unlike with, say, a visual text (Nabokov 1980: 3).

When we write we are looking outward, reaching towards a page, a computer screen, then towards a reader, no matter how remote or inaccessible that reader might be at the moment we start to write, no matter how far off the journey, how inchoate the story, the ideas, the very phrases. It is like setting off for a foreign country, with no map, and the barest of supplies. We are looking up and out towards a dark or hazy spot on the distant horizon, or just beyond it. But if that voice is to work, we must return to earth. We must reverse the gaze, to an inward one, back to the text and its point of origin. Here in the pauses of the phrases, in the breaths between lines, in the aspirated sounds of the punctuation, the emphasis, in the blinding contrast of black marks on white page, here is the writer's voice, a culmination of incipient idea, empty longing, and long, long journeying into an unknown that, paradoxically, is urgently desired. We return to the text's point of origin and the voice of the text is finally realised.

Alvarez reminds us of Ford Madox Ford, who aimed in his fiction for 'a limpidity of expression that should make prose seem like the sound of someone talking in a rather low voice into the ear of the person he likes'

(Alvarez 2005: 44). How many times have we read a book that we believe the author has written for us and us alone? Felt almost physically the author sitting beside us speaking in a low voice directly into our ear?

It is generally agreed that literature works when the author has captured a voice. But it is more than that. It is when the voice has captured a reader, taken them over, confined them, held them in thrall, utterly. It works when the voice succeeds in convincing the reader that it exists, and no more. This is what 'authenticity' in writing is all about, a term too frequently used instead to denote some kind of literal truth in the text, which is largely an irrelevant quality.

I know, of course, that when he formulated his ideas regarding the death of the author and the birth of the reader, Barthes was referring to the irrelevance of authorial intention, to the positioning of the reader's creative involvement in the meaning of the text. But the same rules apply to Barthes, who is also the author, and so what he intended by the phrase can be irrelevant to me, the reader, if I want. So the death of the author may mean as much about the discovery and assertion of voice as it does about the spuriousness of intentionality.

In this argument, voice emerges when authors retract their gaze, look inward, become their own reader, not a writer, forget they have authored the text, and regard the text as if they are reading it for the first time, as if they have not written those words, as if they, the authors, are dead. The birth of the reader then also means the flourishing of voice.

The perfect literary kiss

What about the other reader, then, the one to whom the text, once that voice is established, reaches out, the one whom the text has desired all along? This takes us back to a fundamental question: for whom are we writing? Kylie Tennant, author of over 20 books including 10 novels, always claimed she was only writing to make her father and husband happy, that she was writing for just two people. *Drylands*, Thea Astley's last novel, was according to its subtitle written for the world's last reader. When I first read that I decided it was me. And it is my book. (That it can be your book too doesn't take away that fact.)

In an age of marketing, writers and students are required to think of the reader, to define their audience, to claim their corner of the market. *Who are you writing this for?* is a common question. The young adult market? The twentysomethings? The reading group demographic?

But we also know that books written purely for oneself have the capacity to speak to a vast readership: CS Lewis's *Chronicles of Narnia* were written well before the advent of a clearly defined children's fantasy genre; JD Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye* was written long before the term Young Adult was a gleam in a media strategist's eye. Lewis famously said that he wrote his fantasies because no one else was writing the kind of books he wanted to read. In markedly different ways, both texts are conversations with the authors' selves.

For the perfect literary kiss I can't think of a purer voice in all of contemporary Australian fiction than that of the narrator of Murnane's novel *The Plains*, first published in 1982. Murnane's simultaneous intimacy and distance, personal involvement yet consummate detachment, means that in his prose we receive a remarkably unmediated voice, one that is innocent, has converted the whore of language into the virgin of fictional prose, has returned to paradise before the fall. Murnane is at once writing his own life yet is as far removed from autobiography as you can get. Or, to use Barthes' singing voice terminology, he has created a grain of the voice, one that is not personal, yet is individual, dramatic and expressive on every necessary technical level, one that emerges from deep within the cantor's, the writer's, own language. A voice, if you like, that is fully *embodied*. Where we hear the lungs as well as 'the tongue, the glottis, the teeth. the mucous membranes, the nose …' (Barthes 1990: 296).

The voice of the reader

But my final and most difficult question is this: how do we teach all that? The problematics and complexities of acquiring and refining voice are reflected in the literature. Here the how-to guides are, I would suggest, pretty well useless. Cultivating voice comes with some weird advice, ranging from the bizarre to the puerile, for example the advice to dress all in one colour and sit down to write, to write in the dark, or with your eyes closed, to take a voice on a walk with you. Alerting students to the voice of an individual text is meant to be the best way. But merely examining the brilliance and ingenuity of another's voice can often fill one with envy and despair, bad qualities to have on board when trying to write. Or it may lead to what Dorothea Brande famously defined as a 'contagiousness of style', what you might call infectious reading: 'a newspaper, a novel, the speech of someone else, even your own writing,' she warns, 'all have a circumscribing effect' (Brande 1981: 138). But is this entirely correct? We have all encountered students who don't read much, who seem not to like reading, who claim, with that astonishing mix of arrogance and naivety, that their policy is not to read while they compose the Great Australian Novel or whatever, as if theirs is a literary alchemy so pure that contact with the printed word will taint or infect it, to use Brande's metaphor.

This argument is plausible when the application of voice is restricted - as it frequently is - to narrative voice (do we write this story in the first person, or third person, and so on) or style (is this voice ornamented, 'natural', ironic, playful, etc). But we are talking about voice that extends beyond the author, to that of the text. Voice, as Paul Dawson has argued, is a 'narratological concept': it does not indicate the inner self of the writer, it indicates the 'speaking position of the text itself' (Dawson 2003: 6).

'Authenticity' in writing is said to be the key to synthesising the narrative voice and what we might call the emotional, expressive voice of the author, the embodied voice, in the one text. Commonly we will explain to our students that the way to assert voice is by learning to read as a critic, to read as a writer, to be a critic as well as a creator of one's own work.

I would not disagree with any of this, but I think there is one crucial step

beyond this, whereby the speaking position of the text is established by an utterly indispensible aspect: the voice of the reader. *Show, don't tell* has become a mantra repeated in creative writing classes the world over. Reveal via action, dialogue, implication, rather than outright statement, we tell our students. But it is rarely explained *why* this is so important. What is not told becomes what is articulated, because the voice of the reader is permitted its role in the creation of narrative. Maybe it becomes the true voice of the text. For in creating the text I am invoking a reader. It may be just a father or husband, like Tennant, or a whole nation full of book club readers, but the reader is the implied object of the text. When I write I imagine the reader is reading it, and this means the reader's voice is articulating, creating the words. This is the real voice of the text. When the author remembers the reader and allows the reader's imagination to assert itself. (This is why showing not telling works, why hints and gaps and absences are more potent than spelled out utterances.) When the reader steps in and fills in the gaps. Thus the text is only ever a palimpsest, a draft, a black-and-white outline, for the reader to superimpose their imagination. The reader is talking the text.

The voice of the text is one that never justifies, complains, explains, berates, defends. Where there is no position of the author. It is a paradoxical, perhaps even confronting, thought: the more experienced a writer, the more voice is retrieved and projected, the more it disappears. Voice becomes the story, exactly as in that Lopez piece, 'Murder':

> In order to write well you must first learn how to listen. And that in turn is something writers have in common with their readers. Reading well means opening your ears to the presence behind the words and knowing which notes are true and which are false. It is almost as much an art as writing well and almost as hard to acquire. (Alvarez 2005: 13)

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