

A voice of my own

I understand the imperative of the Provost Award presentations, in this inaugural session, to be a description of the *work* that belongs to the several areas of my intellectual endeavor. This is a daunting objective. The work of any project is not borne as an insignia on the shoulder of the event. What a work is, is different from the piece (text, artwork) it generates. The outcome is a tangible object, in my field, in the form of a book. The book is no doubt the project of a work, but the work lies elsewhere.

The thread of my work over the last four decades repeatedly breaks as though weak and friable, breaking down—that is, being deconstructed—or breaking through—becoming eminent, going a level up. For years, this bothered me, but I've come to see the work is not in the continuity and endurance, but strangely in the gaps. In the interval—the night of Penelope where everything is unworked that by day—with the suitors, is where work makes its uncanny appearance.

If the rupture is essential to the work, then to speak of the work is to speak of nothing. It is to abandon the need for proof in favor of paradox (for paradox is spun of the stuff of nothing) and the expository format for that of fragmentary writing. The unbroken line of dialectical discourse, driven by logic and in pursuit of eternal truth, is surrendered to the demand of disruption. Fragments are incomplete. They are written as unfinished separations, not coming to or heading from unity, not necessarily consistent, and

especially, open to mark the absence of totality. If there is a trajectory (there is), it is without destination. To speak of the work, of these books and pieces, is to suspend the question of *what* work it is, to not arrive at a response to it. If the work lies in the event of the break, the only hope is to permit interruption to arise and be performed. The work then appears, as Derrida says, through the tain of the mirror.

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One special concern of mine lies in the performative dimension of language, how words can *do* as well as say. The seeds go back to J.L.Austin's distinction between constative and illocutionary functions that results from an excess of meaning that appears unexpectedly and without reason, and *performs* what it says rather than saying it. As a guide to research, the surplus has led me in uncanny directions; directions of the uncanny, a favorite topic of Freud and Heidegger as it points to the limit-experience, a great vivid undergoing at the peak intensity of feeling. The uncanny—the German word is *Unheimlichkeit*, homelessness—introduces specters and the ghost-like summons of conscience in the world. This other-worldly performance that challenges our everyday view of reality repeatedly interrupts the proceedings of business-as-usual as we try to make sense of things and place ourselves within the worldly order.

It followed me to a poetics of such moments when intensities sear a swatch of violence through the fabric of language. The poem becomes a trace, all that is left of a pathway through a sector of meaning. There is then the work of the poet, a supple translation that

places the debris of sense-making in a common way of speaking, along with the question regarding reliability and authenticity. What speaks through the distortions and stresses created by exposure to an energetic element of chaos speaks as an oracle, an other. A voice messianic, prophetic, and hard to understand. Here are the last lines of a poem 'The Beach', written during the dark winter of the Bush war, from *Window with 4 Panes*:

No one asks whether the soldiers
there who laugh at death
have deserted all ultimates
or if such hollow times
seek beyond where we do.

Somewhere windswept sirens
bring to mind a conflagration
a field whose assigned plots
lack even a headstone
to mark the agony twice.

Heidegger has a nice thought. He places poetry of high purpose on the map in the same neighborhood as thinking. Thinking is intrigued by the unthought and follows its invisible guidance. It breaks with what is presumed to be law and comes to dance in the errancy that finds the truth of untruth.

This chaotic element—or rather, the trace it left, the legacy of the event of its being—fascinates me. At one time, for instance, I kept records of what amounted to semantic trails—like trails of a shooting star. This is what poetics entailed, a taut attention to exactly what *saying* arose from the semantic flux, imaged as the flow of language parts before assemblage into intelligible units. That original buzz or murmur—the Sirens song of Homer’s epic—is the womb or original matrix from which thought and language both emerge. The poet, to continue with Heidegger’s thinking, has to listen closely, to lend an ear, to the words issuing from the primordial maw.

In any event, the record yields a poem that is dictated by the terms of passage of this element quite alien to it. As if spoken by the voice of the other, the poem would bear a strange, exotic quality, interesting, and holy too in some respects. Here is ‘Resile’ (from *Jiggerweed*) as an example:

Resile

Some informed seam
to name it
hooked by chance
takes a deep hold

an event threads
its verbal way
from that silent
branded steel petal

along the row a hand
pins in place all
across a visible gap
both sides at once

lauds neither piece
but the breach itself
threadbare vacancy
done poorly undone

It is the voice being voiced—the dictation—that draws my attention. In the work, in the essential solitude of work, there is a voice that dictates what then comes to be written.

The ghost-voice of the writer, and as I think about it, that makes the work of all serious writing ghost-writing. The author named in fact is always a plagiarist.

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Jacques Derrida's Ghost: a conjuration is an interesting text. It is the first of three anarchist texts, the second of which came out last year as *A Propos, Levinas*. *Jacques Derrida's Ghost* was, I felt from the start, ghost-written. Whole sections were scribbled

down in feverish dictation. The project is inherently self-reflective. It looks at how the writing of not only this alien voice but also that of the writer shows itself. This undoubtedly is wrapped up with the post-modern obsession with reflection and its image. In looking at itself, it recognizes how it is also otherwise than itself. The double is the figure of post-modernism. I am I plus the other. As Levinas says, the psyche is in fact the-other-in-the-one.

The project has as a central concern the place of voice for Derrida whose work is known for its de-emphasis of speech in favor of writing as the prime delivery of language. In the book, I ask: ‘Has the voice reading already been incorporated into the text as it is put in writing? The hypothesis proposes an “overlap” between the two vocalities, in the form of an influence, a reflux or fluctuation from the other to the one that pervades the writing experience.’ [p. 21] The play between reader and writer, of an ethereal nature, becomes the focus of my present project, discussed below.

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My attitude toward this chaotic element—the excess of meaning over available means of expression—hasn’t always been acceptant. Early work exhibits a negative response to what would botch up my plans for writing. I would try to outflank the indeterminacy—as John Cage called it—with architectural sketches of the work that would determine a strict protocol to be followed. This repression reached its height in the 1993 book, *Everyday Spirits*, in some ways the most successful. I had been impressed with Alain, the twentieth century French essayist, so I structured the work by days of a month, each associated

with something of the everyday world, like keys, money, or rope. Each thing offered a pathway to an other view of reality. It was as if each were gifted with a voice that transcended, or transgressed, its own quotidian way of speaking and indicated an impalpable otherness to what we take for granted.

But the speaking of things depends on a rare condition on the part of the dweller in the world: solitude. Solitude is the condition of being between the one I am and the other I am not. In *Everyday Spirits*, solitude is personified by the frontier guard, in particular, the one who stops Lao Tzu to ask him to write about the Tao before exiling himself forever in the desert. Here is the text: ‘Solitude is the guardsman’s cloak. He wraps it around himself as a uniform, an identity, and a protection. It is not an amulet for magic or a cloth with mystical powers, for it is made of human vulnerability and has a strength only of that substance. Solitude brings the guard to look at himself both ways, from outside in and from inside out. Fear, loneliness, and longing occupy a foreground whose distant background is composed and vibrant. Solitude is the last frontier, whose chain of command ends leagues a way in a populous center, the metropolis. Solitude is a margin between the two realms, a skin that holds them apart and a membrane that allows the two to interpenetrate.’ [p. 177]

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My work with the voice comes out of that context. Voice ultimately means the voice of God from the whirlwind, or (as Derrida says), God—or death. Voice therefore comes in

infinite variation. My very first public presentation of the theme, in a talk at the library 35 years ago, showed a special interest in the simultaneity of speaking and listening. All my voice work stems from this experiment. I had been struck by a Canadian researcher named Tomatis. A time-management expert, he had been called in to solve the mystery of why the monks of a certain Dominican monastery in southern France were suddenly getting ill and unable to do their arduous daily routines. His discovery, after long travail, is stunning. He found that by habit, we do not listen and speak at the same time. But when we do, a special state of consciousness results which has the effect of equilibrating and energizing the vital forces of the body. The aging monks had recently been excused from the ritual 2:00 a.m. chant, in the interest of giving them additional rest. It was in singing that the two activities, voicing and hearing, worked together. The baby had been thrown out with the bathwater.

From when do I date an interest in voice? During my college years, there were two separate occasions when I had a vividly traumatic experience of speaking. On both, I was called to give a rendition of my work, and on each, when I went to articulate, I found no voice. It wasn't there; I could not speak. The impression of being lost to voice, of an absence of voice, of an absent voice, forcibly struck me. Of course one could talk of stage fright or performance anxiety. But in the momentary loss when voice is there no longer, silence also is lost—to a murmur or cacophony. This discordant irresoluteness interests Levinas a lot, especially in his early thought. There, it is the primordial presence of a reality that does not yet exist, yet forefigures all that will exist and does. This is also the disaster, as Blanchot writes in *The Writing of the Disaster*. It acknowledges the

pressure of an other language, or the other to language, that cannot speak yet threatens to swallow the speech-making capability of this language. Our preoccupations with everydayness absolve our concern for it, but it doesn't forget us. It is a haunt. My moments in college, and others since, recall that research is compelled to account for both languages, this one and its second that harbors the threat of interruption and rupture.

A text that gives voice to an otherwise than voice is not without voice, but showcases a voice 'without moisture and breath' (Yeats)—a voice of the imaginary that enraptures, enchants, charms, entrances, and terrifies as it speaks its voice, voicing imaginary things in an acoustically inaudible way. The imaginary *en voix* brings all the play of what could be called phonemics, the basic forces that resound in a voicing of voice and give it a distinction among the infinite other arrays of sound that are possible. The field in which this strange voice makes an appearance is, of course, literature.

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The mythic element, I have found, cannot be excluded in the work if it is to make sense. Mythic forces repeatedly interrupt the smooth flow of continuity that reduces everything to an order in the field of experience. There are ruptures 'when the god raises its head.' They appear as excesses of meaning, irrationalities whose meaning is traumatizing and is therefore forbidden, exiled, muted, silenced. They are presented as fatal gaps in our knowledge of a situation. The mythic, further, expresses through images that burst through the fabric of language to cause upheavals and the need for new paradigms. I

suppose this is a way of addressing the imaginary, the other to the symbolic order. This leads me to confess that I'm another victim of the post-modern fascination of figures of myth and the way they signify the absence of the gods in our metropolises and metropolitan tropes of thinking.

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'A voice of my own'

From the Preface of my 1990 monograph *Voice*: 'I am thrown into contact, immediate and undeniable, with the sound of myself in the midst of my voicings. In the place at which the study of voice begins, my voice is inescapably my own. No way around it exists. Yet until struck, I escape heeding the sound of me myself in the voice. And after, I may deny the disturbing note as *my* own. That we avoid attending to the voice that is ours reveals a hiddenness surrounding voice. The hiddenness is double. The note of imperishable recognition is hidden from the being whose voice it is; *and*, we of voice lie in hiding from sounding the truth of ourselves.' [ix-x]

The aim of this project seems clear: to trace the voice that I speak back to its proper origin, or as Heidegger would have it, to 'my ownmost potentiality for being.' At the beginning, there was a conviction that the I, my self, possesses a unique identity that could distinguish it, in its manifestations, from other identities. Perhaps it belongs to our humanist heritage, the search for a mark of irreplaceable signature that makes the ego

stand out from all else as sovereign master. Perhaps I don't quite believe that humanism is dead.

There was a shift that made the fact of concealment central rather than that of the obscure identity. In *Everyday Spirits* [1993], I noted that 'A hiding place is the vow remade into a home. . . . A child does not keep a hiding place to hide *from* others, but to discover again the hiddenness of things.' [33] Concealment does not protect what is hidden from assaults that which would destroy it but hides the fact there is nothing to protect. The secret is nothing; there is no secret. The multitude of voicings that had worried the unique one of myself is transformed by this thought. It renders the I polyvocal, or even more radically, it makes the I a multiple voice, a multitude of voice. I am I plus the other.

A voice of my own? If there is nothing proper to 'my own,' myself, there is in truth no such voice. It would turn out that my search was a fool's errand. A signature voice, belonging irreducibly to the self, would have to give way to either imposture (where a single voice poses as mine) or diverse castings (nothing essentially belonging to me in voice) or to an otherness altogether. This is another rehearsal of primordial being's resounding, or, as I put it in the frontispiece of *Voice*, citing Melville's *Moby Dick*: 'While the mate was getting the hammer, Ahab, without speaking, was slowly rubbing the gold piece against the skirts of his jacket, as if to heighten its luster, and without using any words was meanwhile lowly humming to himself, producing a sound so strangely

muffled and inarticulate that it seemed the mechanical humming of the wheels of his vitality in him.’

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The second of the anarchist text, *A Propos, Levinas* [2012], gives indications of how to continue when the object of search turns out to be fool’s gold. While the main line of thought calls into question the condition of sincerity in voice (and straightforwardness in speaking), I am also interested in what I now call the voice on mute. As if someone pushed the mute button in the player and the voice continued, but inaudibly. The voicing then defies acoustics and returns to inwardness. In inwardness, it finds itself in a milieu to pose questions that are ethical in nature. About this voice, there is always already the matter of responsibility. Whose? It is an absent voice, about which I write, a voice (like the gods absented in myth) more forceful and impressive in its presence of absence than in its proper presence. The text: ‘It is gone, foregone, missing in articulation, never living speech nor living in speech. Since it is a voice of the dead, from the “other side,” vociferation calls for (after Derrida) a work of mourning. Such work has bearing on ethical responsibility. Predating the existence to which one is delivered, it requires interiorization, memorization, a gleaning of its (impassible) essence in order to be read. A most difficult work. It is the recalling the words, not of the dead, but of the other that never lived, never died, never spoke. An exhumation of a script ante-dating “the book of the earth,” into which the linguistic aptitude of the laryngeal apparatus speaks new life.’

[p. 65]

The other voice, absent, preceding any voice-making of my own, deconstructs the I and its auxiliaries and leaves it powerless. The occasions when it takes place are real—perhaps the Real—and leave their mark on everyday life. Wasn't it a case of extreme impoverishment of voice that I experienced that came to motivate the entire study of voice? I think so. Paralysis of the 'laryngeal apparatus,' immobility of the vocal chords: isn't this how the absent voice speaks? It speaks through disruption. *Disruption* is the title of the second book of the trilogy called *The Intervening Subject*, in which I attempt to locate the center of our being in the emptiness at the center. [The other two are *The Stop* and *The Delay of the Heart*.] Here is what *A Propos, Levinas* has to say about the matter: 'It is the performance of rupture (rapture?), [as Levinas says] "a denuding of the unqualifiable *one*, the pure *someone*, unique and chosen; that is, it is an exposedness to the other where no slipping away is possible".' [*Otherwise than Being*, p. 50] It challenges the I with suffering, disorder, de-stabilization, slippage of self-meaning; the I is absolutely subject to it, and has its identity deferred to another time. The deferment, a time past that had been indefinitely postponed, is responsible for bursting in on time present as strange non-event, a non-sequitor. The letter always arrives before it is written, the effect before the cause.' []

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From a voice of my own to none or many: is it true to say that I don't exactly know what I've been seeking in this *topos* of voice? The pathos of that truth is well worth taking in.

Not authenticity, not propriety, not authority, not mastery. The list of virtues of having one's own voice has to be chucked. There in, in its place, a sense of impoverishment that comes with voice. Something is wanting of the voice, obscure, enigmatic, fascinating. Lacan would call it the object voice. It is perceived as missing in action, or, I could say, it appears in its disappearance. It is forgotten and has to do with forgetting.

The third anarchist text, *In Blanchot's Voice*, is currently in progress. In it, I practice voice as ventriloquism, in the hopes of throwing a conjuration of Maurice Blanchot's voice on to the ear of the reader, the one whose ear freely opens to the phantom voice that makes itself heard by inscription, by the one who inscribes it as the hearer. There, words themselves have a life of their own. What they say behind our backs. What we don't know about words because we think of their being mute, deaf, dumb, blockheaded. We use words and rarely see beyond their serviceability in communication, documentation, prayer, and incantation. Even in the last two consecrated modes of usage, the embrace doesn't go deep enough, into the living materiality of the word. Aren't the words given to voice, *verbum* to *vox*, so that it bonds them to the world by inscription?

Blanchot introduces the notion of the neuter. The neuter, the third one of a binary situation, can be thought as the voice that is neither active nor passive, perhaps akin to the middle voice of classical Greek. It lacks an acoustical presence, it is never audibly verbalized. It speaks solely as the voice of writing, presently heard. It tells us nothing of the world, it holds no mirror up to nature as literature was able to in classical times. In a way, it ceases to speak of life, at least, as of remembrance. As I say in the text: 'There

can be no distinguishing truth of the neuter voice, one that separates it from the others. It has perfect cloaking. At same time, the conversation, mimed successfully or not, exposes the voice that waits. It is from waiting, suspended in passivity, that voice is given—from and not to. From waiting come destitute words, worn down, drained, used up, no longer able to work. The waiting voice, the voice on mute, exhausted before the first word, nonetheless speaks to whomever listens, pen ready. Its speaks first and foremost of its proximity, its immediate reality, and discovers that words give only weak indication of the nature of the crepuscular real. As important, their rhythm. The drone of its parataxis is an onomatopoeic presentation of that on which the conversation is centered. Soon after, to be named the sirens song.’

This is the segue to the poem. Rhetorically, what is the poem but the impossible saying, speaking a language not meant for communication, not serviceable or employable, a useless language, an abused one? Leaning over the abyss, in Heidegger’s image of the poet Rilke, it translates the utterance of the night, outside the daylight world of human endeavor, into recognizable forms. It sings the sirens song in our ear, crediting us with the possibility of hearing it. One could think of words, used up, mere shells of their former meaning, rustling (as Vladimir says to Estragon) like dried leaves. Stripped of its intelligible content, they are material—sounds, phonetic outbursts, acoustical contours. The poem is a materiality vibrating according to its own laws, apparently transgressive. It calls us, it fascinates, it invokes, and we, standing on this shore, crane toward the other, to listen to the last lines of ‘In no wise’ from *Window with 4 Panes*: