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Essay

Of Many Voices: A Poetic Gift of Togetherness

*With a poem by Momtaza Mehri*

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In her collection of essays *About Poems*, Anne Stevenson casts lyric poetry as poetry of the voice and the ear. At first glance, we might interpret this as the singular voice of the poet and the ear of the reader. But poetry isn't so simple. In writing, some poets invoke other voices, sometimes fictional or constructed. In other cases, the voices they invoke are the real-life voices of others by incorporating words spoken and stories told into their work. Examples such as Brendan Kennelly's *Cromwell* and Carol Ann Duffy's *The World's Wife* show how the voices of historical figures can be brought to life through poetic representation. And then there are poems that aim to bring together the voices of others, voices that had been marginalised and left unheard in society. For instance, Charles Reznikoff's *Testimony: The United States (1885–1915): Recitative*, for which he draws on over 500 court cases as source material. Through this long poem, Reznikoff presents the stories of many whose voices would have otherwise been lost to vast legal archives. Will Harris's 'The Crick' (2021) commissioned by Poet in the City for their project 'A Drop of Hope: Poetry from a Vaccination Centre' offers a more contemporary example of a poem that seeks to bring together the voices of others. Here's a brief extract:

Four cabs, that's  
how many I tried  
to flag down  
to get here. Don't  
know how they  
knew. Was it  
my hair? My skin  
tone? I wore shades  
to hide my eyes.  
A snow moon  
hung over London  
as I travelled  
home. It looked  
like I felt.

Harris used the words visitors had written on postcards at the Francis Crick Institute during the UK's Covid-19 vaccination programme, as well as those of a volunteer he interviewed at the centre. In an artist statement, Harris writes, "I decided to keep to the language of the responses, only altering personal pronouns and syntax where appropriate. I wanted the multiple voices to come together of their own accord, expressing the simultaneous anger, grief and hope of this moment." What's especially notable in Harris's statement is the desire to bring multiple voices together unmodified; his aspiration, to allow the voices of others to find ways of connecting organically, thereby resulting in a work that is truly multivocal.

Such poems have been called 'poetic transcription', or 'research poems', to capture a method of writing in which the poet uses interviews or other first-person accounts in the construction of their

poem. As we will see, neither term quite represents what's going on in the writing of them. The poem may be wholly constituted by the words of others or added to/modified by the poet. This approach to writing can be traced to the centos (or patchwork poems) of ancient Rome, poems composed of lines from other poems. A modern example is John Ashbery's 'To a Waterfowl', in which he incorporates lines from Shakespeare, Hopkins, Eliot, Yeats, Browning, and Tennyson. Another reference point for poetic transcription can be located in the found poetry or "readymades" of Dadaism, such as Howard Nemerov's 'Found Poem'.

One might be tempted to think that all poetry is to some extent the product of transcription of other voices. In outlining his method of cut-out poetry, William S. Burroughs famously declared all writing as a "collage of words read and heard and overheard". Many poets draw on other voices in their writing by taking inspiration from the conversations, overhearings, and other encounters with language that make their way into the poet's notebook, but poetic transcription is more direct in its incorporating of other voices into the poem. Found poetry and other kinds of collage poetry are not necessarily sensitive to the origins of the words used, appropriating words and phrases of others as mere resources for the poem. Such an approach to writing doesn't address the situatedness of the authors of those words, whether they are of people who have been unjustly marginalised (due to ableism, homophobia, racism, sexism, etc) and whether appropriating their words causes further harm by removing context and changing the meaning of their words (thereby denying them a voice). Poetic transcription, on the other hand, aims to invoke the voices of others in addition to using their words and in doing so hopes to enable other voices to be heard and bring community together through poetry. Such an approach to writing is therefore responsive to the ethics of who speaks and who gets to be heard (although, not necessarily always successful in meeting these ethical demands).

By 'voice' in poetry we often mean written words 'sounded' by (or presented to) the mind, rather than literally heard. In *About Poems*, Anne Stevenson draws a helpful distinction between two ways of understanding the poet's voice:

There is the physical voice, an *articulation*, either vocal or mental – a pattern of long or short, stressed or unstressed syllables as they come to mind in the course of writing a poem. Then there is a sense in which the phrase 'the poet's voice' is used metaphorically to refer to an individual's speech idiom or characteristic mode of expression.

Although distinct, these two senses of poet's voice are connected, for the physical (or embodied) voice, which can be characterised in terms of one's imagined speech or the felt quality of language for some individual, shapes the expressive voice, which is to do with how one uses language to share some aspect of individual thought, feeling or experience with others. The first grounds and centres language as embodied, that is, the sounds of words (albeit imagined or spoken aloud) are heard as located at a particular time and place. However, it is important to note that deaf poets may have a different understanding of voice. As John Lee Clark writes "Sound is only one of many vehicles through which poetry can travel from feeling and thought to expression and understanding. In other words, sound is mere medium, not source." In light of this, we can understand the physical voice as the existential voice: it presents the use of (written) language as the product of someone's thinking, feeling, and experiencing. The second, the expressive voice, is suggestive of intention and meaning; a desire to share one's thoughts, feelings, and experiences. What is of interest here is not the voice of the poet as such, which we might associate with questions of style and artistic vision, the coherence brought to a body of work, or the voice of a given reader, but rather voice understood as representative of a perspective. That is, the unique ways individual people see, think, and feel as

manifest in their use and appreciation of language. In other words, how individual people use language and what they express through the language they use.

The possibility of a multivocal poetic, such as poems produced through the method of poetic transcription, raises questions about the relationship of the voice of the poet to the voices and voicings within their work. For instance, it's not clear whether the poet's voice is neutral in respect to other voices brought into the lyric fold or whether the poet's perspective dominates in the poem. If it's the case that even in a multivocal poem the poet's perspective dominates, then the ethical issue of who gets to speak and who gets to be heard returns. It's also not clear to what extent we should think of poetry as multivocal: does this apply to a very small number of poems or should this idea be applied to poetry at large? The following poem by Momtaza Mehri is not only a meditation on the role of voice in poetry but was written as "poetic minutes" of a discussion involving poets and members of the public on the nature of voice and voices in poetry in relation to another of Poet in the City's projects, 'Connected Through the Unknown: A Hounslow Covid Archive' (2020). The poem captures the response of the poet to the discussion together with traces of the voices of others who took part.

#### **A Common Gift by Momtaza Mehri**

Against vanity, I try to translate this philosophy of flight,  
Of time's trickling pace, the race of words catching up to intentions.  
Even the bearing of witness has its limits, its gated horizons.  
Bare the wound's wonders. The sparrow-sized ball of delight  
Buried in the chest. Is the poet a ventriloquist of the senses?  
Who buries what has been unearthed?  
Lives swallowed into the fold of verses. Each voice a shard  
Of glass, uniquely jagged. An intricate lattice  
Of particular joys & defeats.  
How to give life to the stubborn beauty of difference?  
Mine the depths of the ordinary. The poet tries.  
Knows there is no such thing as ordinary.  
Between storyteller & subject,  
Boundaries disintegrate, between what is felt & what is transcribed.  
Affinity is a group activity.  
Attention binds the gap.  
Generous exchange of details, of entangled paths, this slow dance  
Of capturing the fleeting & often forgotten.  
*Be with each other*, the poet said. The *with* is its own expanse, a looping orbit

Of familiar ties. My story is his, hers, theirs, *ours*.  
Craft a rearticulation of raindrops gracing the cheek,  
A tea-stained book, the blossom  
Of violets, the roar of planes overhead.  
You don't have to experience something to understand it.  
To preserve it in the cocoon of words is to illuminate  
Some essential truth. To give it another, longer life that can  
Be held in the lap  
Of someone else. Nesting.

What is the role of the poet in relation to the voices they bring together? Mehri's poem works through the possibilities: bearer, translator, witness, ventriloquist, miner, burier, storyteller, transcriber, (re)articulator, preserver and (be)holder. None of these roles quite captures what the poet does. Rather than dwelling on the particularities of these roles, we can look to what they share: each represents a relationship between the poet and others. Rather than understanding poetry in terms of the singular voice of the poet, poetry can be seen as relational in the way it connects voices, including the poet's own.

Poet and literary critic Susan Stewart points to the relational aspect of sound and voice in lyric poetry in her book *Poetry and the Fate of the Senses* (2002). She writes:

When we invoke or call for sound, we bring ourselves, too, into a certain path: we take our place in time. And when we attribute sound to a voice, we wonder what figure will be made, who speaks and from where – when the voice arrives, we learn something, too, about where we stand. Sound and voice in lyric [...] take part in these common aspects of aurality and the reception of aurality. Yet lyric also is made from silence, from the pull of sound against sense, and from places where voices are at the brink of their individuality. Such voices are filled with the voices of others who have been brought to bear on the speaking or singing person. The person is the vessel of the particular meeting of these particular voices.

If we think of the poet as voicing, or as a "vessel", of other voices we open up an understanding of poetry as a meeting place of voices. An intimate meeting place where voices can intersect and shape one another through the poet's voicing of words in the poem. "Be with each other" Mehri writes. Poetry offers a way of being together, that is, an empathetic connecting of others by experiencing and feeling together: poet to reader; voice to voice; voice(s) to reader; reader to reader. The 'being with' signalling a form of contentment in the companionship of others, not a claiming of the other but sharing with another or others. Public language, by its very nature, is a way of being with others. In speaking, we use the words of others, not as belonging to them but as shared with them. We voice words that have been used by people before us and will be used again. Being users of language ties people together but also offers opportunity to influence others' use of language. Modifications of articulation (changing how a word is said) or meaning (changing its use) by an individual might be adopted by others, thereby shaping their use of language (sometimes this occurs at a cultural level but can also just happen between friends and smaller communities). Our physical voice is shaped by those we have communed with in our lives. It represents an intimacy with others who shape the

ways we speak from the patterns of speech (and aurality of language) to the syntax and grammar of one's expression. Therefore, even the supposed univocal poem invokes multiple voices through the poet's singular voice. The poems I have been concerned with here, however, are doing this in a more explicit way, that is, writing with intention about the relationship between voices (including historical voices that have shaped our own use of and sounding of language), how voices connect and how they might shape one another.

To bring multiple voices together, not only must the poet select elements that are shareable in terms of the physical voice, but the poet must also be able to 'sound' or 'give voice to' the other voices. The poet's task is to discover commonality with the patterns and rhythms of the other voices and their own. Other voices must be resonant with the poet's own for the poet cannot escape their own voice but can bring others together with or through it. In doing so, the poet must attend to, or rather, tend to these other voices and the separation between them. Finding connections in rhythm and the aesthetics of language (such as assonance, consonance, and other aspects of the experiential beauty of the aurality of words) serves as the connecting force between voices, whilst allowing the voices to express difference in perspective. This is to disagree with philosopher and literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin who argues that the rhythmic structure of poetry "destroys in embryo those social worlds of speech and of persons that are potentially embedded in the word: in any case, rhythm puts definite limits on them, does not let them unfold or materialize." Instead, what the practice of bringing voices together achieves is to show us as part of the same social world by revealing ourselves as sharing in the expressive power of language. As Robert Pinsky writes "In a poem, the social realm is invoked with a special intimacy at the barely voluntary level of voice itself. Communal life, whether explicitly included or not, is present implicitly in the cadences and syntax of language: a somatic ghost." Poetry brings awareness of our intimacy with others through our use of language, that is, as members of a shared social and linguistic world (although this isn't necessarily inclusive, for instance, poetry that emphasises language as heard may exclude those who cannot hear).

Mehri's poem itself is structured as to make present the joining of voices – the joining, or rather, conjoining of language – with many of its lines bringing together two sentences: the full stop lying in the middle. A full stop that signifies a meeting place, a meeting of difference, different lives, different perspectives. The form reflects the fragmented nature of voice in the poem, thereby making visible the rejection of singularity of voice. Each unit giving the possibility of its own history and perspective. The bringing together of voice is intimate, affective and bodily, and consequently these voices take on a felt connection to the poet's presence of 'being there,' which is itself responsive in feeling. The voices of others are transfigured and united through the embodied voice of the poet, that is, by the poet's affective shaping through the act of vocalising other voices. This makes the poet's project harder for there is the need to preserve the individuality of each contribution yet in bringing them together the poet faces "the stubborn beauty of difference" in uniting them within the poem. If what is valued is difference, how does the poet bring these disparate voices together as one? How do voices meet in difference and yet remain sensitive to that difference?

There are many ways of invoking other voices. Voicing is something that can be done in the singular or plural. For instance, 'speaking for' or 'on behalf of' others is to bring voices together as one. When one is 'speaking on behalf of', the voices of the many are subsumed into the singular, dominant voice and consequently, the many are denied a continuing, active voice. However, on a plural conception of voicing, one speaks *with* others, allowing voices to speak on their own terms. Rather than 'speaking on behalf of' others, the poet takes on the role of democratic representation by

allowing the poem to be dynamic in its voices and voicings, that is, by allowing other voices to shape the poet's own as it figures in the poem. However, poetry can never be a mere collage of other voices. The poet must weave these voices together and in the process re-shape and re-voice the words from the community. What results is a mutual re-shaping of voice. In such a poem, the poet speaks "against vanity" for their voice is not privileged in the poem; the poet does not claim to be all knowing or have some special access to truth. The poet's 'gift' is in their ability to bring (both historically and geographically distinct) voices together in companionship to present something greater than the individual self. Such multivocal poetry brings voices into a relationship through the lyric and in doing so, allows the poem to express a collective, human perspective from what is shared between.

Lives swallowed into the fold of verses. Each voice a shard  
of glass, uniquely jagged. An intricate lattice  
of particular joys & defeats

The image of the shards of glass represents the many voices invoked in poetry as mimetic reflections, aspects, glimmers of voice through the words, phrases, meanings, and patterns of speech. What is captured in the work is only ever partial and incomplete. The voices that are expressive of individual lives figure in the poem as 'shards of glass', incomplete, removed from the whole and unable to be fitted back into place. Something of the other remains in the poem but much is lost. In drawing on other voices, the poet does not remove the relationship to other voices; a trace of another always remains. What is lost is gained in the emergence of a social and relational plurality that embodies what brings voices together.

To preserve it in the cocoon of words is to illuminate  
Some essential truth. To give it another, longer life that can  
be held in the lap  
of someone else. Nesting.

Mehri presents poetry as a nesting of voices: within one's voice are the traces of others. Embedded. How we speak, how we structure our sentences, choose our words are all the product of the influence of others. This is how we preserve one another's ways of seeing the world in our language. The poet's nesting of other voices within the voice of the poem also nourishes and nurtures those other ways of thinking, feeling, and experiencing for it will hold them until they take flight amongst the breath of readers and ears of listeners.