

Who Speaks When the Speaker says He?

Kobus Moolman

There is something about his right hand too,
something that terrifies him.
He can no longer click his fingers.
He can no longer put his hand
flat onto the table.
He can no longer feel
when he cuts or bruises or burns himself.
It is only the sight of blood
on his clothes or blood on the bedspread
that alerts him to an injury.
He wonders how much longer
he will still be able to hold himself upright
against the sky.

(Left Over, 2013)

Who is this 'he'? Who is this man who can no longer click his fingers? Who can no longer feel when he cuts or bruises himself. And why can he no longer feel? Is something wrong with him? I ask again. Who is this unidentified man? And what is his relationship to the speaker? In order to answer these questions – to understand them first – requires that I go back over my writing trajectory.

With few exceptions, my early published poetry was dominated by the lyrical mode of expression and address. In these poems the subjective self spoke to the reader in short, self-contained personalised utterances. The first-person singular was the predominant mode of address, as well as being the focalising agent for all the narrative and figurative elements. Furthermore, the focus of this speaking voice was concentrated and singular, and wholly consistent throughout each poem:

A square window sits
beside me watching the world:

Evening, a pale gray hour

and now a solitary bird, wide-winged
rides slowly the lonely railroad
of a neighbour's sky . . .
(“Viewpoint”, 2000)

In general, the subject matter of the poems was personal rather than social; frequently revolving around intimate human relationships, and their complexities: ‘I long to smell the roses again / on the breath of your hands’ (2000) or ‘The morning mirror of my hands / rouse from sleep the clouds apart / slow to the smooth travelling / of your skin’ (2003). In this sense, the poems satisfied Ruskin’s definition of lyric poetry as ‘the expression by the poet of his own feelings’ and T.S. Eliot’s notion, in his lecture “The Three Voices of Poetry”, of the poet expressing ‘his own thoughts and sentiments to himself or to no one’.

From a structural perspective, the poems were short; usually no more than half a page, some even less than that. They were entirely self-contained and inwardly focussed. They did not follow-on from a previous poem or lead on to another; neither did they consciously cross-reference each other or repeat figurative tropes in a deliberate or patterned manner. The poems employed a loose, open-ended stanzaic structure, with the ragged, seemingly random, and often terse, run-on lines of free verse.

However, increasingly, I grew dissatisfied with this solipsistic lyrical voice, with the structural limitations of its mode of address, and with its inability adequately to reflect my slowly changing concerns: concerns of language, identity, form and meaning, and the complex ways in which they acted upon a reader. The single self-contained short poem that previously had been able to reflect all I had wished to say – that terrible, sometimes beautiful, outburst of self-consciousness – now felt forced and contrived and plainly repetitive.

Was I destined to keep saying the same old things in the same old way?

What about all the strange new impulses – the perplexities and contradictions, the paradoxes and unsolved longings – which, as I grew older and became more aware of the limitations of my body, I could no longer express in the tired vehicle of the lyric? Because, as the Canadian poet and translator, Erin Mouré, writes in *My Beloved Wager*, her collection of essays on the art of poetry: ‘Part of the job of poets, and art . . . is to reach past what we already know’. To seek after a form or, more accurately, a range of forms that will not so

much be original (all language is recycled, I believe), as an illumination, a light slanting in through the dust from a totally different angle.

Not so much a 'new' poetry, then, as an 'other' poetry.

But what was it that I had wanted to say for so long, but had not yet been able to say? What was I concealing from myself, which was preventing my work from reaching past what I already knew and finding another form and other voice?

The answer of course had been staring me in the face for the past forty-odd years. It was not the capitalised Self. The individual ego as I had been expressing it for so long. It was in fact the body. What Seamus Heaney, in his translation of *Beowulf* dubbed a 'bone-house'. And it was my body specifically. My knees, my ankles, my back, my shoulder, my wrist, my neck, my bladder and kidneys. It was my body defined in medical terminology as having a congenital *spina bifida* present from birth from L5 down to S5.

For much of my writing career I had either ignored my own body or concealed its presence within highly abstruse imagery. In *Time like Stone* (2000), my first collection, the presence of a differently-abled body slips in indirectly: 'So a broken set of feet / dream swimming into distance' ("Of Drowning and Drought"), while in my second collection *Feet of the Sky* (2003) there is a similar reference: 'On two feet, broken / by birth, I / strain to see what is beyond' ("Defenceless"). My fourth, *Separating the Seas*, took these references further, both explicitly and metaphorically; prompting the critic Michael Chapman in his article, ' "Sequestered from the winds of history": Poetry and Politics beyond 2000', to comment on 'the world perceived through the disjointed anatomy of a hand separated from a foot, or a foot one good, one game'.

And yet these had all been passing remarks. Why had I not wanted to engage with this subject matter more and in greater detail?

The answer is complex, and no doubt rooted in personality; in that intricate weave of shame, pride and defiance that characterises the tension between wanting acceptance (and not wanting to stand out) and at the same time insisting upon the right to difference.

Interestingly, too, I also see now that this reluctance to commit my writing wholeheartedly to confronting the issue of disability (my disability) is that I did not want to limit my writing, to circumscribe it within a self-referential field and so foreclose on possible readings. Despite insisting upon the personal voice in my lyrical poetry – and upon the legitimacy of such a claim for an expressive interiority – I wanted at the same time to withdraw from placing too much attention upon the personal self. A paradoxical forward-backward impulse that could not go anywhere. (Except fall over.)

So one could say that there was a breakdown of sorts in my writing, an absence or lack, at the heart of my lyrical work that became more apparent as I continued writing, and which produced frustration and dissatisfaction. Because – and this is the crucial point – I was lacking the form and the language that would enable me to look at and to speak about the self and its ‘bone-house’, in all its broken, disintegrating and non-functional aspects.

So it was a form (or forms) together with an appropriate expressive lexicon that I needed. But where to turn in order to find such?

When I examined my own work closely, I once again found clues, small precursors that I could exploit.

In my earlier poetry there were several stylistic elements which – though modestly and perhaps apologetically utilised – pointed the way towards new alternatives for my work, alternatives upon which I have capitalised upon in my last three books, *Light and After* (2010) *Left Over* (2013) and *A Book of Rooms* (2014).

In my first book the objectification of the speaker as ‘the man’ in the three poems “Strangers”, “The Dream” and “Out of the Side of God”, turns the inwardness of the poems on their head. It replaces the narrow, solipsistic focus of the ‘I’ with the wide, objective gaze of the impersonal third-person. In this way a character (personae in the classical sense) is deliberately created who can act as a filter or mediator for the presentation of emotions which are too close to the bone, what George Bowering in his long series-poem, *Kerrisdale Elegies*, described as: ‘Things that could never be told / so we gave words instead’.

By the time we get to the fourth book, *Separating the Seas* (2007), only five out of the forty-two poems employ the first-person singular. The distancing device of the third-person combines with elliptical imagery in the poem “Transfiguration” to produce a dislocation of sensory experience as a way of enacting the difficulty of poetic composition: ‘Only a dark mouth / pointing upwards. // Only a red eye / in the centre of his hand.’. This dislocation, or what Chapman intriguingly described as ‘disjointed[ness]’ in my writing, has been profoundly affected by the work of Paul Celan.

The provocation that Celan’s writing offers to the conventional way of understanding a poem, and to the allusive way in which meaning can operate in a poem – what Mouré refers to as its ‘subliminal code’ – has influenced my approach recently where discontinuities, paradoxes and negations are consciously employed in an effort to render into speech that which is almost unspeakable, the experience of the body and of the body’s private story.

But let me return to the question of the third-person. In *Light and After*, *Left Over* and *A Book of Rooms* the use of the third-person as a distancing device forms the basis of the

collections' focalising agency. Purely because the material was in a certain way the most personal I had ever dealt with (my disability, my experience of divorce, illness, ageing) I needed to find a mechanism that would allow me (if only in my head as I was writing) to stand back from personal history and examine, comment and reflect upon it without risking self-absorption. In this way, the character 'He' is a construct who mediates between the private, particular experience of myself as a disabled poet and the reader, and thereby transmutes the personal into the impersonal.

I would also argue that by removing the first-person singular as the locus of signification, authority and empirical experience, I am offering instead a pluralisation of identity which refracts experience and biography in terms of flux and ambiguity. This gives rise to what Juliana Spahr terms 'an autobiography of multiplicity', and it aids further in problematising the assumed resemblance between the textual subject and myself as author. In so doing, possibilities are opened in the text, not just for alternate, but also more complex and deeper ways of reading and understanding.

Thus, a poem like "There is something about his right hand . . ." seeks to tease the reader beyond the expected and the formulaic. In my late twenties I was diagnosed with Arnold-Chiari Malformation. This is a structural defect in the cerebellum and spinal cord frequently associated with spina bifida, and most often occurring during foetal development. Mine, however, decided to wait until I was in my fourth year at university. I was treated, and fortunately recovered much of the strength in my right arm and hand which had been seriously affected. But there are some functions that my hand still cannot perform (clicking my fingers for example), and the right side of my body is without any sensation.

All of this biographical actuality provides the departure point for the poem, but I strongly resist reducing the poem to simple reportage on a medical condition. I am less interested in the literal content or meaning of particular references, and more interested in what happens at that point where the reader is forced to abandon their expectation of the confessional and the demand for veracity, and in so doing is encouraged to enter into the 'other' life that the language of my poem sets up – a particular experience of being in the world and being in the body, an experience attested to in the last three lines of the poem which shift the register from reportage to allusion.

This is why, apart from the description here, I have always in readings refused to offer any autobiographical explanation; something which interestingly, fewer people are concerned with than with the so-called 'darkness' of my work.

But why do this, you might ask? Why not say that the poem is about disability? Am I ashamed of my disability? Ashamed of my body?

On the contrary. It is the language of the body – its creaks and groans – that has specifically released a deeper content in my work and my interest in alternative poetics.

But allow me to develop my argument further in order to answer this charge more adequately.

At the same time as I was shifting the speaking voice of my poems (and inventing a character which I could manipulate into foreign situations, however much he looked like and walked like me), I was also actively experimenting with form, and in particular with the long poem. The idea of the poetic sequence – whether in accumulative, non-linear sections, or apparently random and disconnected divisions – prompted a shift away from causal narrative as an organising principle towards what Gary Geddes calls ‘the kind of tonal unity you might expect to find in stream-of-consciousness fiction, where the twists and turns of thought and feeling matter more than causality or the paths of logic’.

Geddes’ concept of ‘tonal unity’ is critical in understanding something about sequence or long poems which I discovered in the writing of my own first long cycle of poems, *Anatomy*.¹ This series of meditations upon the body was structured into six independent sections, each focussing on a different part of my body affected by *spina bifida*: thus we have “The Hand”, “The Foot”, “The Foot (the Other One)”, “The Shoulder”, “The Foot Re-visited” and “The Wrist”. A key element of *Anatomy* is its use of repetition and parallelism to produce an incantatory, almost hypnotic, rhythm that carries the poems through progressively intimate and visceral revelations of the body.

Apart from its episodic structure, and its exploitation of a rolling rhythm, *Anatomy* also anticipates the figurative use of language particularly in *Left Over*. Earlier I mentioned the imperative I had felt for a new form and a new way of speaking that would make possible a rigorous and ruthless confrontation with the uniqueness of my own ‘bone-house’. In *Anatomy*, I succeeded, I believe, in fashioning a complex interweaving of metaphoric language that was able to transmute the closed specificity of individual lived experience into a set of evocative codes which allowed a reader imaginative access to that experience even though they might a) not ever have shared it, such as disability, or b) might not even really be sure precisely what is being described.

¹ The collection was written during a writer’s residency at the Caversham Centre for Writers and Artists in 2008, and first published as a limited edition chapbook.

Federico Garcia Lorca has described this functioning of the poetic image as being a ‘transference of meaning’. I find this a useful way of understanding how imagery operates, and in particular how my own practice has evolved in relation to the body, especially atypical embodiment and the legitimacy of this expression.

In the section titled “The Foot” from *Anatomy* reference is made to ‘a hole’: ‘The foot is a hole made by a shard / of memory’. On one level this is a direct reference to an unhealed ulcer on the ball of my left foot (which I have had for more than thirty years as a result of poor circulation), but crucially the image also operates beyond that specific knowledge: it speaks to any experience of absence, of loss, buried in the past.

The figurative language in my recent work is constructed on this same idea. The ‘transference of meaning’ about which Lorca speaks is the operating principle behind all of my current language.

But I must caution against viewing Lorca’s idea of the ‘transference of meaning’ as being once-off; a more or less permanent transfer from the tenor to the vehicle within a metaphoric image. Instead, I would propose that it be regarded as a more dynamic process, one that operates like the synapses between nerves, between which there is a constant movement of energy, never able to be fixed and held. Thus it is always a case of this *and* that. Never *or*. So Lorca’s ‘transference of meaning’ does not cancel out or remove the twin poles of the tenor and the vehicle in a metaphor, but actually holds them both in a fragile, agitated poise; a process that Lyn Hejinian in an interview describes as:

the *point sublime*, which is the point of encounter in which unlike things encounter each other, and create an extraordinary, albeit usually a very momentary place within a work – if that makes any sense. And I think you hear it in the Stein [Gertrude Stein], in those copulas that she puts of: ‘an elephant and a strict occasion,’ and if you linger on that juxtaposition, there is a moment in which an elephant and a strict occasion are absolutely in place together, logically. And then the logic explodes.

But my challenge in *Left Over* of maintaining movement and tension across a range of contrasting expressive forms was critical during the writing process. In his essay, “Making Strange Poetics”, Fred Wah elaborates upon the forces that sustain his own long poems, describing the ‘looping ways in which they pause in order to continue’. This ‘looping’ pattern of Wah’s (what I would describe in personal somatic terms as three unsteady steps forward, two unsteady steps back) played a vital role in helping me overcome what could easily have

become a digressive and incoherent exposition. The method is evident in the collection not just in the conscious manipulation of forms, but also, importantly, in the actual imagery employed throughout; in the specific type of vocabulary used (concentrating on the one hand on terms that derive from the body – the trope of walking, for example – and on the other on the purely quotidian, especially the domestic), and the deliberate way that this vocabulary is then re-configured so as to shift the emphasis away from referentiality (and self-referentiality) towards something more aligned with Lorca's idea of the '*transference of meaning*'. As Mouré argues, in terms uniquely suited to the medical concerns of my writing: 'The opening up of sense perception is an opening of the powers to heal. Referentiality distorts more than it conveys, it injects us with the comfortable'.

But all of these processes and techniques do not simply hold off or estrange the threat of the confessional. The confessional is consciously transmuted through the activity of new forms into something that no longer privileges fact over fiction, the real over the imaginary. Through an attention, then, to alternative writing practices in my recent collections, to multiple ways of representing and telling, something new is created (something 'other') that unsettles the narrative conventions of autobiography: conventions that to this day draw their significance from Philippe Lejeune's description of autobiography as a 'retrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his own existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his personality'.

Against this conventional view, Julian Spahr, in her essay, "Resignifying Autobiography: Lyn Hejinian's *My Life*", argues that 'despite the relentless challenging of the subject in twentieth-century theory, it is still a cliché that autobiography is the place where conventions of representation are narrative, where text uncovers a visible and essentially legible self'. The long prose poems of Lyn Hejinian – as in her serial collection, *My Life* – have strongly influenced my conceptualisation of the confessional, and have helped me see beyond the limiting components of Lejeune's definition: 'retrospective', 'prose narrative' and 'individual'. As Spahr writes:

Hejinian's work, centrally concerned with biography and autobiography, explores and complicates the relationship between alternative, non-standard writing practices and subjectivity, that the generic conventions of biography and autobiography often smooth over.

In *My Life*, Hejinian mixes poetry and prose, autobiographical confession and what Spahr terms 'language-centered aphorisms' in an unchronological fashion through reminiscences,

observations and commentary. Hejinian insists that alternative means of expression are necessary truly to represent the confessional or the real. Readers are encouraged to choose between a range of competing multiplicities in her sentences, rather than to follow a stable and essentialised subjectivity through the conventional structure of continuity. In so doing they are exposed to broader possibilities of meaning, which they themselves are forced to bring to the text, and are confronted with the imperative to ‘question the changes in perception, knowledge and thinking [that] they undergo’, according to Spahr.

So, to return via a long and circuitous route, to the question posed at the beginning of this article: who is this unidentified man who ‘can no longer feel / when he cuts or bruises or burns himself’? I’m sure the answer is quite clear now. He is someone made up, a fiction basically; but made up out of my bones and my nerves in order specifically to dislocate what we all think of as the Real and the Factual, in the interests of the bigger story. He is the lie that tells a deeper truth about the body’s private experience when it utters the word ‘I’.
