ESSAY

How Words Fail

Does language reflect the world? Or is it a distorting mirror that never gets reality straight?

BY CATHY PARK HONG

I always felt an anxiety about language, an anxiety that grew more pronounced when I began writing poetry. I rationalized this anxiety by rolling out the immigrant truisms. Growing up, I had to negotiate the yawning gap between speaking Korean at home and battling it out in the schoolyard with my faltering English (for a while, my flimsy arsenal was "You shut up!" for every imaginative invective hurled at me). I thought the English language was a tricky, trap-filled activity I had to somehow *master* like squash or table tennis. Nabokov once called English "an artificial, stiffish thing" and wrote, "If Russian was his music, English was his murder"; yet he wrote some of the most exquisite prose in the English language. I am no persecuted exile, however, but a pampered second-generation American whose childhood difficulties with English nonetheless left their indelible mark.

When professors first introduced the craft of poetry to me, I felt like Leonard Zelig, Woody Allen's chameleon-man, who appropriated the behavior of whomever was around him. "Write about your family experience! Write about what is true to you," one dramatic poetry professor told me in his office, and then gave me poems by Asian American poets who sounded exactly like Sharon Olds. I tried to compose clear, confessional gems but thought of them as interesting exercises in imitation. When the professor looked at them, he told me I was beginning to find a voice. "Whose voice?" I asked. "Yours!" he announced, and the meeting was over.

"Finding your voice" is a familiar workshop trope, one that assumes poetry is an expression of an authentic self. I was asked to write in natural, plainspoken speech (none of which felt natural or plain to me), and this teacher mistook the result as me. He embraced the principle that a poem represents a person who is a unified whole, and that the syntax of the poem is a window to the person's, or writer's, mind. The professor's assumptions proved only that I was a damn good mimic.

My teacher's concept of "the voice" is shared by many poets, including Adrian Blevins, who wrote an essay about the music of sentences for PoetryFoundation.org. She opines that the sentence structure of a poem gives us a clear diagnosis of the poet's mind. In her reading of John Berryman's "Dream Song 29," she writes, "The ungrammatical . . . excerpt produces the emotional effects of an anxious or scattered psyche." She sees a direct correlation between Berryman's progressively unraveling mind and his unraveling syntax, concluding, "It's interesting to note that Berryman began playing with syntax as a young man, when he was still, as far as anyone can determine, happy enough. As his life becomes more and more pressured . . . he becomes more and more serious and seems to lose, as a result, the sense of daring syntactical play. . . . It is therefore possible to speculate that Berryman's suicide was at least partly the result of a loss of his syntactical distinctiveness."

Blevins believes in a causal relationship between the author's psychological state and the author's syntactical choices, asserting that Berryman's "loss of syntactical distinctiveness" helped lead to his own suicide. If we are to follow this logic, how to explain Hart Crane, who offed himself yet wrote poetry that is syntactically distinct? Or Sylvia Plath, who was at the top of her syntactic game when she shoved her head in the oven? Or that many poets today are happy on antidepressants yet write syntactically dull poetry? Blevins also observes that the sentences of Gertrude Stein and certain "post-post-post-postmodernists" are "stark raving mad," implying that the poets must obviously be bonkers.

Blevins says that the poetic "sentence" is a unit for "talk" and that "talk" is the essence of the poet's authentic being. I, however, cannot shake the belief that English is "an artificial, stiffish thing" and was grateful to discover Stein and a whole lineage of poets, in particular the Language poets, such as Lyn Hejinian and Ron Silliman, who pretty much thought the same. Their poetry emphasizes the materiality of language rather than language as transparent conduit for soulmaking. They asserted that the "I" in the poem is really a fabrication of the self rather than a direct mirror of the author's psyche. As Hejinian once wrote, "One is not oneself, one is several, incomplete, and subject to dispersal." From these ideas, the Language poets stylistically formed their own versions of what poet Ron Silliman dubbed the "new sentence": poetic lines that are syntactically fractured, purposefully atonal, averse to the first person.

Ultimately, though, I was more drawn to poets who severed syntax out of a sense of cultural or political displacement rather than for the sake of experimentation. History and circumstance alienated these poets from their own language, placed them in the margins of their cultures, where they were witness to language's limits in articulating a cohesive voice. Through deliberate inarticulation, they managed to strain out a charged music from syntactic chaff, a music borne out of negation. The poet I have most in mind is Paul Celan.

Celan's relationship with the German language was tortured and ambivalent. Son of Jewish parents, he lived in Romania and grew up speaking German and Yiddish, Hebrew, Romanian, and Russian. When the German forces conquered Romania, they deported Celan's parents to the concentration camps. Because his German mother tongue was also the language of his parents' murderers, Celan wrestled with it in his poetry, a tension evident in the fissures, elisions, and neologisms of his poems. From these ruptures, Celan sutured a composition that radiates a haunting and terrifying music. To wit:

> No one kneads us again out of earth and clay,
> no one incants our dust.
> No one.
>
> Blessed art thou, No one.
> In thy sight would
> we bloom.
> In thy
> spite.
>
> A Nothing
> We were, are now, and ever
> shall be, blooming:
> the Nothing-, the
> No-One's-Rose.
>
> With
> Our pistil soul-bright
> Our stamen heaven-waste,
> Our corolla red
> From the purpleword we sang
> Over, O over
> The thorn.

The repetition in "Psalm" creates a propulsive cadence. The poem begins with a negation of Genesis. The recurrence of "No

one," a reference to God (or his absence), creates a tonally hammering antiprayer as it denies Creation. "Blessed art thou" is negated by the thudding absence of "No one." "No one" becomes "Nothing" and then returns as "No-One's Rose." The song, driven by absence, ends somewhat redemptively, as the flowering song or the word sings "over" the imagery of suffering, Christ's thorn. Yet the singing is also fractured—the invocatory "O" in the line "Over, O over" is a hesitant break in cadence. Driven by spiritual necessity, the music of Celan's poetry is both brutal and brutalized.

Like Celan, the poet John Taggart entwines the music of his linguistic experiments with a deep spiritual sensibility. Son of a Methodist clergyman, Taggart was born in Guthrie Center, Iowa, in 1942 and spent most of his childhood within the church culture. He equates "poem as gospel service," positing that poetry should have a spiritual power that can be wrought from its own music. But Taggart is no traditional lyricist. His "voice" is not a stand-in for the self. His ultimate goal is to turn the poem into what he calls a "sound object," where words cease to be metaphor and become part and parcel a compositional score.

Deeply influenced by the experimental music composer and writer John Cage and Objectivist poets such as George Oppen and Louis Zukofsky, Taggart incants through the "silence of the gaps" that surround the unadorned word. His words are mortarless, often unbound by clauses or punctuation. Rather than isolated poems, Taggart composes poetic variations that are circular, repetitive, and serial. In fact, his largest collection of poems, *Loop,*is aptly titled since his poetry obsessively returns to a set of nouns in different arrangements, as if each poem is a remix of the previous one. "Nativity," for instance, scrolls down as if it were enacting a feverish sermon:

> If you kneel
> sender will teach
> will teach you
> here's a sender
> no bright harness
> still a sender
> if you kneel
> will teach you
> teach the shout.

But Taggart does not completely abandon content. Like Celan's work, Taggart's poetry can be read within a cultural-political context. Here is an excerpt from "Twenty-one Times," Taggart's most explicit poem about Vietnam and his own version of Wallace Stevens's"Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird":

> 4
> Napalm: soap will not wash the word out
> The word breaks through partitions and outer-walls
> Breakthrough of cells of the word in the mouth.
>
> 5
> Napalm: the heart rubbed and smeared with soap
> The young heart is soiled with fire
> Soap cannot cleanse the soiling of the fire.
>
> 6
> Napalm: why the child caught on fire
> The itching as of creatures for possession of words
> Glitter for self and nation.

The repeated incantation “napalm” is an attempt at exorcism, as if to cleanse the horrors associated with napalm. But despite the attempt to “wash” it out, the word grows cancerously: “Breakthrough of cells of the word in the mouth.” As in many of Taggart’s other poems, the nouns in “Twenty-one Times” are reshuffled, and each time a noun is reintroduced, its associations become progressively menacing: “the young heart is soiled with fire” leads to “why the child caught on fire.” As the poem’s inexorable momentum builds to a frightening pitch, “napalm” as a word metastasizes inside the mouth, until poem’s end: “Napalm: speak and the word glows and plays / speak and suffer torment for love / because of you no one will have to write the word down.”

Celan and Taggart have created a distinctly haunting and astonishing music through solecisms and hesitations, through the broken sentence. For them, the disassociation of voice from language is not just a philosophical choice. It is also political. The voice is not always a freeing form of self-expression. It can prove to be a difficult transaction, a construction of fragments, as much conflicted demurral as actual communication, as much about what is unspeakable as about what is speakable.

Originally Published: July 31, 2006