Voice

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Voice

Alanna McArdle

*Voice* is an extract from a longer text entitled *Dark Matter* that is made up of five parts, each containing verse, lyric essays, and prose-poetry. *Dark Matter* uses the lyric ‘I’ and considers the radical possibilities of its application in the interrogation of trauma and selfhood, and the conflict between self-definition and medical/institutional definition. The text is both narrative and lyrical, tracking part of my experience as a person with Bipolar Disorder inside and outside of medical institutions. Taking inspiration from Denise Riley’s *The Words of Selves*, *Voice* focusses on the syntactical and phonological features of self-expression. Riley posits: ‘Announcing what I am may… labour under its burden of communicative intent, for my self-definition can be a determined appeal for recognition’. What, then, does this ‘recognition’ mean for a speaker confronting their own trauma and mental illness? What does that burden of intent do to the writing which aims to convey it? This question of what the self is in relation to others is a key part of the work. This philosophical query takes on an extra burden of its own, and is often amplified when self-definition is interrupted by institutional definition, for instance, diagnoses. ‘What am I to others?’ becomes ‘Am I a person? Or a patient?’

Judith Butler, in her essay on Descarte’s *Meditations*, puts forward another problem in response to these questions, that ‘the body is given through language, but it is not, for that reason, reducible to language’. In *Voice*, I ask whether the writing down of my body, and therefore my illness, somehow transcends the experience of being constantly defined and re-defined within institutions and their inevitable hierarchies, partly structured by the inaccessible language of diagnosis. In writing, do I refuse this institutional construction of my body? Whose language holds more power?

*Voice* interrogates the generic and formal distinctions of poetry and life-writing to pose questions of how writer and speaker interconnect, and to explode arbitrary literary conventions which themselves limit and oppress expression by way of their rigidity of definition. Anne Carson’s work, in particular the poem-cum-play *Norma Jeane Baker of Troy*, was influential to the work, as it probes language’s constructive and deconstructive impacts. In one of its ‘History Lesson’ interludes, an unnamed speaker muses, ‘Sometimes I think language should cover its own eyes when it speaks’. Emily Berry’s speaker in the poem ‘Ghost Dance’ wonders ‘I cannot tell what I should choose / Whether to speak straight into the camera or keep my back to it / Whether to distort my voice when I say the difficult thing’. In *Voice*, I aim to show how this covering of the eyes of language, this distortion in saying ‘the difficult thing’ may be transmuted through lyric, to use the ‘I’ as more than simply a perspective.

In this way, *Voice* explores the possibility of recalibrating or reclaiming the oppressive syntax of medicine. It asks how the self is transformed through not just the experience of illness, but also illness’s subsequent side effect of institutionalisation, and the intersections of other ‘othered’ and marginalised identities and experiences within this discursive category.

*Voice* draws on and re-appropriates the oft-misogynistic and derisively applied label of ‘confessional writing’. First coined as a name for a school of poets of all genders, the descriptor ‘confessional’ has

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transmuted into a catch-all term for work assumed to be about the author, especially when that author is a woman. Leslie Jamison writes that:

[confessional writing’s] heritage is often traced to women writers, Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton, and its critiques are insidiously – and subcutaneously – gendered. So many of the attacks against the confessional mode come back to the language of the body: An author is spilling her guts or bleeding on the page. Her writing whores itself out, exposing private trauma for public fame.⁵

Plath’s poetry, often reconsidered in the wake of her suicide as being directly linked to her own voice as a poet, rather than filtered through a speaker’s ‘I’, became somewhat emblematic of the confessional mode. This default assumption of an ‘I’ being the poet herself acts in a way that can impose limits on the imaginative and intellectual capabilities of the poet. Poems, especially those concerned with the so-called domestic, then become frivolous diaries, a list of things deemed unworthy to be made into art. Veronica Forrest-Thomson, in Poetic Artifice, unpacks Ted Hughes’ criticism of Plath’s poem Last Words, which he says ‘is a poem which would have been safer said by a persona in some kind of play’.⁶ Thomson responds that this may be so ‘if we are concerned with Sylvia Plath the individual... [Hughes’s comment] demonstrates the notion that the woman who suffers cannot relieve her suffering by becoming the mind which creates’.⁷ To redefine Plath’s poem as a theatrical monologue attributes a quality of melodrama to her work, rendering her use of the confessional mode a mere emotional outpouring. Furthermore, to re-contextualise what Plath made as verse into another genre entirely removes all agency of the poet, a violent reduction of authorial intent.

In Notes Made While Falling, Jenn Ashworth asserts that ‘any time a woman utters a sentence about her own experience, she becomes a kind of terrorist and there’s an army out there waiting to strike her down’.⁸ The confessional, then, should be reclaimed and added to an arsenal, should be used to speak unapologetically of lives and experiences deemed at once too difficult to hear, yet too unimportant to take seriously. What women writers often face, Ashworth goes on to write, is ‘the sense that in uttering the truth of painful experience [a woman] is letting the side down and embracing the straightjacket and the hysterics sickbed a little too easily’.⁹ Voice aims to reclaim these utterances, to confront the historical nexus of discriminations that has led to what the psychiatrist and author Phyllis Chesler calls ‘the female career as psychiatric patient’.¹⁰

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⁷ Ibid.


⁹ Ibid.

Voice

Do you try to deplete something in yourself
the therapist asks

But really she doesn’t she never asks anything so relevant
more of the same like what did you dream last night

I dreamt of being sad guess that means I’m sad

Maybe she says you’re just an existentialist tells me to read Camus

A lamp shines dumbly in the corner

I stifle a laugh

Maybe I’m just a lamp or the dumb moth on the lamp

pretty way to say you want to die
It’s been years!

Where are the moths now? Fizzed to black on their scabrous bell jars

It’s been years!

How much chalk do you swallow on any given day?

Years, darling, years, still not better?

What do the voices in your head sound like?

Just kidding! I can hear myself so clearly right now
I sit on a squeaky pink chair in a room pasted with children’s drawings

Face grey as the walls
turned away from the nurses

I say to them

Sister,
sister,
I’m scared to tell you
how I feel

I hear that voice ringing from the first
nurse in the first hospital

*If you keep crying like that you’re going to be sectioned*

I hear how I stopped crying
hear the lie in my discharge assessment

*I won’t try to do it again*

Hear my brother almost crying
as I lie on the floor, all
coiled up like a dead centipede

Hear
vacantly
*I love you I love you I don’t want
you to do anything to yourself again*

Sister says
*Our job is to make sure you don’t get sectioned*
*That’s why it’s called the Home Treatment team*

It’s unclear whether this is to do with my treatment plan
or the crisis in the NHS: no beds left, children
shipped off two hundred miles from home or
put in jail cells

Can you hear it?
The dull clank of
austerity

I can’t relax
I don’t believe them
I am sent to a different room. Two women in lanyards.

Psychiatrist, FY1 Doctor, mental patient   (mental I said! Did you hear me?
   mental I said)

salmon pink
walls peeling paint,
big box of Man-Size Kleenex for my
girl-sized tears   (good ,   good girl)

I rub my hands together and look at the floor

Ugly carpet

The doctor begins to write in her notepad
Shoesscuffednoeyecontacthairgreasysmallvoicevisiblescars

Let’s start with your history
Imagine your body as a cloud

whole entity made from vapour

and vapour made of shards

always collapsing and rebuilding itself

shredding your fabric

a ladder in the nylon of your want

what do you want?

To not be a collage

I am not a whole person, I cry, I

am just bits and pieces

salvaging, like

trying to hold the whites of the sky

feeling them grate through your fingers

sharp tears

My history

what that means is

my illness

no luxury of life

as others know it.

History

is just a mimicry of a voice
like how I am merely a foil

for all the things that have happened to me.

Write it down.

Before I learnt how trauma works I thought my memory was faulty
I couldn’t retain a thing
If you asked me about my childhood
I would say it was grey

Things float in,
vague as the colour
of pickle brine

Some community choir
swimming lessons
kissing girls in the school toilets,

wanting to die,

(O, Wanting To Die, isn’t that the Sexton poem? and that old first
love of mine, that almost unnameable

lust)

not understanding that I wasn’t supposed to want
what I wanted

The weather in my memories is always bad, but this part might be true
I grew up in England

It’s just that your memory is depressed
says some idiot in
A&E on
Christmas Eve

Someone reads something I’ve written
savs
Children aren’t really this unhappy

What can I say, maybe I’m a liar
for many, mentally ill is a synonym for untrustworthy

Anyway,
I can’t wait to have a wedding so that I finally know which was the happiest day of my life.
Your history

Is that what I'm trying to do here?

The more I say I, will I become me?

The more they say you it wanes and wanes and wanes and wanes and
Here is the failure of language

Who is describing me this time
and what do they mean

And what do I mean
when I write it down like this
spill into existence
or out of it

Killing myself
physically, after all,
did not work
Every night I
open my hands
to the dark weight of hope
and ask
politely
to hold it

The therapist tells me
I don't have the capacity to contain you
and it seems as though you
need to be held
    quite a bit

I'm like,
I'm fine I'm just
tired

I'm like,
having those dreams again
about the feeding tubes
and the way they rasped
out my throat when I
woke

Dreams about how
you don't actually dream
when you're in a coma

Did you know that?

I'm not quite
feeling like myself today

I'm not quite feeling
today
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