

The End of the Mind

*The Edge of the Intelligible in Hardy, Stevens,
Larkin, Plath, and Glück*



DeSales Harrison

THE END OF THE MIND
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Stevens, Larkin, Plath, and Glück

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She attends the tininnabula—
And the wind sways like a great thing tottering—
Of birds called up by more than the sun,
Birds of more wit, that substitute—
Which suddenly is all dissolved and gone—
Their intelligible twittering
For unintelligible thought.

—Wallace Stevens, from “The Hermitage at the Center”

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Strange Resistances

This book is about the uses to which poetic unintelligibility can be put. By poetic unintelligibility I do not mean poetic *difficulty*, the resistance with which a text, to a greater or lesser degree, confronts the reader's desire for comprehension, or mastery, or possession. I take as my topic rather a class of features in poems that by definition cannot be assimilated into a positive account of what the poem says or of how it says it. An educated, intelligent, or divine reader could not overcome this different, absolute form of resistance any more readily than a reader ignorant, stupid, or merely mortal. Of course what is by definition unintelligible to one person—say, the night sky—might overflow with meanings for another. In light of this fact, I can specify further what this book will not be about; I will not attempt to adjudicate differences between subjective accounts of the intelligible. That is to say, I will not undertake to distinguish between the different kinds of intelligibility, those meanings, intended or not, to be perceived in the night sky, or an octagonal red sign posted at an intersection, or an infant's cry, or the sudden disappearance of a certain genus of tree frog from a certain rainforest. Instead, by the term *unintelligible* I designate a specific feature of *art*, in this case literary, poetic art. Such a feature is one where the intelligibility of the artwork, as an artwork, is not merely delayed or deferred, as in the case of difficulty, but arrested, impeded, obscured, damaged, or destroyed. Such a feature then, is to be known only by contrast to instances where the text can presume its own (present or eventual) clarity, instances where the text makes available the possibility of its assimilation to the reader's understanding. Impossibility, by contrast, is manifest as an unassimilable rupture or tear in the fabric of intelligibility, a rupture or tear in the text itself.

To express the difference between this possibility and this impossibility in the most schematic terms, one might think of a lyric by Sappho. If the text is complete and the writing legible, and the reader knows something of

the language and the cultural context of the poem, then the poem is intelligible. Even if a reader knows nothing of Greek poetry or the Greek language, nothing inheres in the poem itself to disrupt this intelligibility. If on the other hand, all that remains of the lyric are six and a half words on a shred of papyrus, the poem, as an intact artifact, has been irrevocably compromised. It may now be a new form of fragmentary artifact, as Pound pointed out, but its margin is defined by an impenetrable opacity. No knowledge, short of the knowledge of where the rest of the text might be found, could restore the poem to its initial intelligibility. In this book, I am concerned with a set of instances where the *poems themselves* present the reader with sites, frontiers, or margins of unintelligibility, poems which entail, from the moment of their writing, disruptions to their internal terms of knowability, terms on which the intelligibility of their address is elsewhere founded.

Poetry is the genre in question not because this category of the unintelligible is unique to poetry, or to the poetry of the period to which I refer, but because poetry *by definition* foregrounds a perimeter of closure, not only in the closed forms of traditional prosody, but also in the ineradicable fact of closure manifest by the line itself—whether or not that line conforms to a named formal pattern. Poetry's insistence upon closure, as I will argue in this introductory essay, makes constantly visible the drama or struggle between what can and cannot be said. Even when a line fits its metrical pattern so seamlessly that the natural cadences and inflections of speech are in no way deformed, as in Elizabeth Bishop's favorite iambic pentameter, "I hate to see that evening sun go down"¹ (from W. C. Handy's "St. Louis Blues"), the line by definition exerts an external force on the utterance, so that what is most natural is also inherently framed by, and suspended in, the artificial. (One analogy would be an undisturbed perspective of pristine wilderness viewed through a window or the "window" of a photograph; even though no "external" agency has intruded upon the landscape, the framing intervenes as a formal principle.) Such formal or external influence on the line can be all but invisible—as in Handy's line—or it can be extreme, as in a line by Skelton, Dickinson, Hopkins, or Cummings. It is this extreme conflict that provides me with my subject, not merely the conflict between metrical form and intelligible speech, but between speech and *any* influence, thematically or formally expressed, that brings to bear a limit condition of *impossibility* for the poetic voice, against which that voice must negotiate—or from which it must wrest—the terms of its future possibility. It is in this way that poetry, even the clearest, most transparent, most intelligible poetry, arrives in the world at a place immediately adjacent to the realm of the unintelligible. The poems I discuss here

are those that explicitly allow their own precinct to be traversed, or incurred upon, by this border.

In this introductory essay, I propose a new reading of a key term in the history of modernism, *impersonality*, with a view toward including in poetic theory an account of how poems can address themselves to phenomena which stand, by definition, outside of representation. Modernism's investment in impersonality, I propose, is in part an orientation toward this region *beyond* human meaning, that realm which Wallace Stevens called "the end of the mind."

IMPERSONAL PROBLEMS

It is certain: between a person and a poem there is a difference. One might expect poetry to make peace with such a fact, if only to secure *ars longa* in the face of life's brevity. But the story of modernist poetry in English (which, in this matter, includes the story of postmodernism) is a long testament to the difficulty bedeviling this distinction. One way in which modernism sought to separate itself from romanticism was in its avowed dissatisfaction with earlier accounts of the poem-person relationship. A new account of the difference was needed, and this new account, as it evolved (slowly, erratically, fractionally), assumed a number of distinctions corollary to the difference between poems and persons: between the impersonal and the personal, objectivity and subjectivity, tradition and the individual, art and emotion. Newly in the forefront was the emphasis on a *negative* relation; the question was no longer (as it seemed always to have been) how art related to life, but how it did not, or could not, or should not. Framing the issue in a formulation both polemical and arch, Eliot's "Tradition and the Individual Talent" declared these truths to be self evident:

In fact, the bad poet is usually unconscious where he ought to be conscious, and conscious where he ought to be unconscious. Both errors tend to make him "personal." Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality. But, of course, only those who have personality and emotions know what it means to want to escape from these things. (*Selected Prose*, 43)

The right kind of *loosing* had to be achieved, not the loosing of emotion *by means of* art, but the loosing *of art from* emotion. But what is the value, or even the nature, of this loosing? And in the interest of what freedom is it to be sought? What specifically is to be freed from what? The voice from the body?

The artist from the person? The speaker from the poet? The immortal from the mortal? In short, what is impersonality, and what remains once impersonality has been achieved? Eliot states that the human emotion is converted through art, catalytically, into what he calls “a new art emotion” (*Selected Prose*, 43)—without specifying *whose* emotion this “art emotion” is:

What happens is a continual surrender of [the poet] as he is at the moment to something which is more valuable. The progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality [. . .] There remains to define this process of depersonalization. (*Selected Prose*, 40)

And it remains still. Which is to say, it remains to be acknowledged that whatever “the continual extinction of personality” may be, such a process subjects all attempts at definition (including Eliot’s) to a telling defeat. What lingers most palpably now is not the veracity or even the possibility of the assertion, but the intensity of the wish—a wish strong enough to persist even in the knowledge that the desired end (surrender, sacrifice, extinction) requires, if it is possible at all, unending maintenance. This conflict renders poignant the word “continual,” which seems to concede, through its very persistence and ongoingness, its own ambition’s unshakeable unsuccess. Viewed together with antecedent remarks in Nietzsche and Emerson, this passage of Eliot’s reveals an eagerness to affix a ballot of no-confidence to the very program it claims to advocate.

Although Emerson, in a letter written in 1832, allows that the war to achieve a vital self-transcendence may be “constant,” he asserts that this war can, in fact, be won:

The constant warfare in each heart is betwixt Reason and Commodity. The victory is won as soon as any Soul has learned always to take sides with Reason against himself; to transfer his Me from his person, his name, his interest, back upon Truth and Justice, so that when he is disgraced and defeated and fretted and disheartened, and wasted by nothings, he bears it well, never one instant relaxing his watchfulness, and, as soon as he can get a respite from the insults or the sadness, records all these phenomena, pierces their beauty as phenomena, and, like a God, oversees himself. (315–16)

The cost of this conflict is an unblinking watchfulness, and while this cost may be high, it nonetheless affords a sure antidote to being “wasted by nothings.” It is a reasonable sacrifice whose end is the achievement of a God-like oversight; in the long run it is the self, the “Me,” that is supplemented, enhanced, and

confirmed. Emerson claims this ability for ordinary human capacity, as a part of what “each heart” can do; Nietzsche, in *The Birth of Tragedy*, conceives of it as a particular, inherent attribute of the lyric poet:

The Dionysiac musician, himself imageless, is nothing but original pain and reverberation of the image. Out of this mystical process of *un-selving*, the poet's spirit feels a whole world of images and similitudes arise, which are quite different in hue, causality, and pace from the images of the sculptor or narrative poet. [. . .] [The lyrical poet] himself becomes his images, his images are objectified versions of himself. Being the active center of that world he may boldly speak in the first person, only his “I” is not that of the actual walking man, but the “I” dwelling, truly and eternally, in the ground of being. It is through the reflections of that “I” that the lyric poet beholds the ground of being. (39)

A person is a lyric poet for Nietzsche when the *I* uttered refers not to the “walking man” but to the “ground of being.” This “walking man” suffers an exile no less categorical than does Eliot's “personal” man, but the terms of his exclusion differ. They are the universal attribute, and not the ideal instance, of the lyric poet. In Eliot, by contrast, as the optative mode calls constant attention to itself, the notorious “extinction” seems less the focus of his argument than the principle of the “continual” in which “extinction” remains inextinguishable, and in which the self is never wholly sacrificed or surrendered. That we may “want to escape” from emotion and personality, and that poetry may offer the means for this escape, says nothing of how one might avail oneself of the offer—at least insofar as Eliot's escape would in some way entail an escape from one's location in the world, whether that location is called one's physical body, one's historical coordinates, or one's cultural affiliations. The impersonal problem, then, is not how impersonality may be attained, but how it relates to the personal in the first place, and how it should be that an impersonal voice seems simultaneously so desirable and so impossible to achieve.

WHO'S SPEAKING IF NOBODY IS SPEAKING?

It was Yeats who understood better than anyone else that the discourse of impersonality, if it was to get anywhere at all, must take into account the fact of physical embodiment. Far from being the corporeal antithesis to the impersonal, the physical body (wholly subject to the external powers of mortality, history, and desire) represented another axis of impersonality distinct from that offered by art. For Yeats, the address of personhood enunciated itself at the point of intersection of these two axes of impersonality, and it was a set of terms for

this impersonal personhood that "Among School Children" proposed. The "body swayed to music," at once distinct from and subsumed by music, becomes *manifest in* the dance that it performs. It is the nature of the Yeatsian paradox that the soul so swayed is most itself, and has most fully recovered "radical innocence" and knit "its own sweet will" with "Heaven's will." The moment of "the body swayed to music" resembles—but ultimately stands in complete antithesis to—the kind of two-dimensional determinism to which impersonality has sometimes been reduced, as in Charles Olson's call for

the getting rid of the lyrical interference of the individual as ego, of the "subject" and his soul, that peculiar presumption by which western man has interposed himself between what he is as a creature of nature (with certain instructions to carry out) and those other creations of nature which we may, with no derogation, call objects. (24)

What Yeats argues, and Eliot concedes, is that there is no "getting rid of lyrical interference" as Olson states it.

The term best qualified for dual-citizenship in the realm of the personal and impersonal was, for the New Critics, the *speaker*. "Depersonalization," Jonathan Culler points out, "instead of eliminating the category of person, leads [in the Anglo-American New Criticism] to the construction and explication of a speaker" (191). The advantages that speakers have over persons, in this approach, is that their identity is defined solely in relation to speech, in which the poem also has its being. A speaker in this sense, as distinct from a person, is not merely a person-who-speaks, or the person-who-happens-to-be-speaking; it is, rather, what a person would be if persons *were made of speech*—what a person would be if speech were the only ground in which identity could be established. Speech (and not, in this instance, *language*, in the Saussurean formulation) is, as it were, the matter which achieves a form in utterance; only at the moment of utterance is a *speak-er*, a self-contiguous and distinct agency, designated. It is in this way that theory of the "speaker" does not stipulate a distance from the body; rather, it sponsors the coherence of what could be called the lyric body, if the body is the site of self-contiguity and distinct agency.

The impersonal, by this account, does not register a qualitative difference from the personal but one of degree. The impersonal emerges not as the anti-personal or the non-personal, but as a condition of *minimal* personhood, whereby all the multifold attributes sedimented into the cultural category of the person are stripped, sanded, or purged away until only speech is left, given form by the least, frailest tissue of specificity capable of distinguishing one

speaker from all others. Speakers, then, are derived through a process of relinquishing not accretion: *per via di levare* not *per via di porre* (Loewald, 226). Chief among the attributes to be relinquished is that of *autonomy*. An impersonal aesthetic is one that declares its willingness to relinquish as fully as possible the agency of the speaker, to converge as fully as possible upon that point where the *-er* in *speaker* designates a property in speech itself and not the idiosyncratic will of the walking man.

According to Northrop Frye, this willingness, this desire, is at play in the medium of poetry itself:

Poetry is the product, not only of a deliberate and voluntary act of consciousness, like discursive writing, but of processes which are subconscious or pre-conscious or half-conscious or unconscious as well. . . . It takes a great deal of will power to write poetry, but part of that will power must be employed in trying to relax the will, so making a large part of one's writing involuntary. . . . Creation, whether of God, man, or nature, seems to be an activity whose only intention is to abolish intention, to eliminate final dependence on a relation to something else. . . . [360]

What this trajectory of abnegation points toward, as Andrew Ross has remarked (214), is a formal extreme, an expressionism, for which other plastic media, perhaps painting in particular, appear more ideally suited. Paint, unlike printed text, can be employed to reveal the yielding of the artist's gesture to those material properties inherent in the paint itself: its thinness, viscosity, translucence, luster, its tendency to drip, pucker, dull, or crack. When Jackson Pollock declares "I am Nature" (O'Connor, 26) he is arrogating to himself the position of the lyric poet that Nietzsche describes; his paint—dripped, dropped, dabbled, dribbled, splattered, streaked, and flung—is applied in a rhetoric of *ceding* or *yielding* utterly to the inherent fluid properties, the *nature*, of the medium; this rhetoric—and it is a rhetoric because spontaneity is always alien to composition—implies a painter whose will has been "knit to Heaven's will" to such an extent that the seam between man and nature is no longer visible. While this is most apparent in, or easily arrogated to, the procedures of expressionist painting, Frye claims that it is no less present in poetry itself; or rather, poetry is the proper term for this yielding of intention to the medium, whatever the medium might be. If in New Criticism, the intending author is supplanted by the speaking speaker, Frye merely extends the New Critical formulation. He agrees that there is an essential split between author and artifact, but that the split makes itself known not merely at the instant the poet removes pen from page. The split is always there; the very act of taking up the poetic instrument is by definition a passing over of the limits of one's intentional will. What was for the New

Critics a practical exigency in *describing* poems, was, according to Frye, an inherent characteristic of poetry itself.

For J. Hillis Miller, in *Poets of Reality*, this abnegation is most properly understood as an attribute not of poetry in general but of modernist poets in particular. The phenomenon that Frye describes is a procedure that became visible—and available to theory—only after a certain number of writers, artists, and philosophers undertook, in the twentieth century, to avow and describe these goals:

To walk barefoot into reality [the program that a strain in modernism conceives and encourages] means abandoning the independence of the ego. Instead of making everything an object for the self, the mind must efface itself before reality, or plunge into the density of an exterior world, dispersing itself in a milieu which exceeds it and which it has not made. [. . .] [T]he will must will not to will. Only through an abnegation of the will can objects begin to manifest themselves as they are, in the integrity of their presence. When man is willing to let things be then they appear in a space which is no longer that of an objective world opposed to the mind. In this new space the mind is dispersed everywhere in things and forms one with them. (8)

This is not Eliot's surrender of the self "to something that is more valuable," even the something that Pollock calls "Nature." It is not a surrender to, but a surrender *of*, specifically of the Cartesian dualism between subject and object. Whether such an account is in fact a credible description of modernist lyric practice matters less than the visible discomfort with any notion of agency in the first place. What is surrendered is not *the* self in the interest of a higher value, which is to say, the higher self of Man, God, or Nature; what is surrendered is the claim to any agency separate from the medium itself. By comparison, the expressionist yielding of the artwork to Nature is an act already intelligible to romanticism; paint becomes the visual manifestation of the Aeolian lyre, to be played by Nature. The agent (Nature) and the medium (paint) remain distinct. When the speaker is posited as the only agency, however, this distinction breaks down. To say that the poem is spoken by (only) a speaker is to propose a state of affairs romanticism could not have imagined. The ceding of the poem's agency to *speech itself*—is an act for which only a modernist sensibility, Miller implies, can account.

If speech by this account is what speaks through, or by means of, the person, then the speaker's agency is limited to the act of invitation, welcoming, or admission that ushers in another agency. It is this greater agency of speech for which the "immortal" predecessors of any poet stand as the sign.

Their immortality points not toward their greater human strength and its undying fame, but toward a different immortality, the non-mortality of speech (for which the muse also is a figure), a non-mortal realm to which they were accorded special access. That this access is not determined by human will suggests why the voices audible in a strong poem, as Eliot models such a poem in "Tradition and the Individual Talent," must be the voices of the dead:

One of the facts that might come to light in this process is our tendency to insist, when we praise a poet, upon those aspects of his work in which he least resembles anyone else. We dwell with satisfaction upon the poet's difference from his predecessors, especially his immediate predecessors; we endeavor to find something that can be isolated in order to be enjoyed. Whereas if we approach a poet without this prejudice we shall often find that not only the best, but the most individual parts of his work may be those in which the dead poets, his ancestors, assert their immortality most vigorously. (*Selected Prose*, 38)

The immortality asserted, then, is not just an assertion of poetic *virtu*. Rather, it is an insistence on the externality of poetic speech to the personal, unique, individual, historical life. It is in this way that modernism establishes a kind of radical classicism, where poetry is not personal except in the most literal, most etymological sense, as a *speaking-through*, where the mouth is not a source, but that point at which an outside speech passes through the local, mortal, enunciating body.

While each of these passages claims for itself the authority of mere description, however, their recourse to paradox and gnomic formulation ("continual extinction," "making . . . writing involuntary," "the . . . will not to will") reveals beneath the declarative rhetoric an underpinning of utopian or mystical polemic. Despite their protestations, intent persists, as does the spectral presence of the mortal body. An act of surrender or of abnegation presumes a subject no less than an act of resistance or affirmation. As long as speech is understood as utterance, as a moving outward from somewhere, that somewhere tenaciously implies some *body*, whose mouth is shaping sound—or whose hand is shaping a line—into speech. Even if—or especially because—this body presents itself as unnamed, immortal, or impersonal, it must trouble any account of how the poem speaks for itself.

TRANSMUTATIONS OF THE BODY

For Allen Grossman, a contemporary theorist of radical impersonality, poetry is that means of representation uniquely privileged with the ability to give access

to impersonal principles of speech, which are both implied by and manifest in the abstract prosody of the poetic line. It is through invocation of these impersonal principles that poetry achieves its deepest purpose, which is, paradoxically, the preservation of what Grossman terms *personhood*. Personhood, as Grossman defines it, is distinct from selfhood—artifactual, the result of a special kind of human work. It is not prior to human agency but the “inscription” thereof:

Now, I am making a distinction which I think is alien from the way you think about things: a distinction between *selves* and *persons*. I believe that poetry is fundamentally antipsychological, and I would summon as my witness the High Modern poets with their advocacy of impersonality, which led them all, each in his own way, to reject the analysis of the “real” self that we find in Freud. I am in effect saying to you that poetry has a destiny not in selves, but in persons; and that, whereas selves are found or discovered, persons and personhood is an artifact, something that is *made*, an inscription upon the ontological snowfields of a world that is not in itself human. (19)

Whereas Eliot had distinguished impersonality from the personal, Grossman, in the interest of a related project, distinguishes *persons* from *selves*. For Eliot, the impersonal was that field wherein immortal voice could be most clearly heard; for Grossman, it is the person, the bearer of the human name, which is sponsored by an immortal principle inherent in poetry itself. In *The Sighted Singer* he articulates this principle, propositionally and aphoristically, in a series of “commonplaces”:

- 1.4 The poem facilitates immortality by the conservation of names.
- 1.5 The features of the poem which are instrumental toward its immortalizing function are those which distinguish it from other forms of words, its prosody (for example, meter and line). (212–213)
- 14. Immortality (poetic immanence) is the descent of the speaking person into the ground of language as a collective possession. (240)

Grossman’s theory takes care to define personhood itself as an outcome of those undertakings which, in Eliot, achieved impersonality and immortality. For Grossman the remainder term is the term *self* which assumes the vulnerable, outcast position that the “personal” had occupied for Eliot, or the “walking man” had for Nietzsche. (Grossman, revising Nietzsche, substitutes “ground of language” for “ground of being.”) The self, then, corresponds to