Poetry

CRITICISM

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Poetry Criticism

Excerpts from Criticism of the Works of the Most Significant and Widely Studied Poets of World Literature

Volume 72

Michelle Lee
Project Editor

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Preface

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PC is designed to serve as an introduction to major poets of all eras and nationalities. Since these authors have inspired a great deal of relevant critical material, *PC* is necessarily selective, and the editors have chosen the most important published criticism to aid readers and students in their research. Each author entry presents a historical survey of the critical response to that author's work. The length of an entry is intended to reflect the amount of critical attention the author has received from critics writing in English and from foreign critics in translation. Every attempt has been made to identify and include the most significant essays on each author's work. In order to provide these important critical pieces, the editors sometimes reprint essays that have appeared elsewhere in Thomson Gale's Literary Criticism Series. Such duplication, however, never exceeds twenty percent of a *PC* volume.

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- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author and the critical debates surrounding his or her work.

- A **Portrait of the Author** is included when available.

- The list of **Principal Works** is ordered chronologically by date of first publication and lists the most important works by the author. The first section comprises poetry collections and book-length poems. The second section gives information on other major works by the author. For foreign authors, the editors have provided original foreign-language publication information and have selected what are considered the best and most complete English-language editions of their works.

- Reprinted **Criticism** is arranged chronologically in each entry to provide a useful perspective on changes in critical evaluation over time. All individual titles of poems and poetry collections by the author featured in the entry are printed in boldface type. The critic's name and the date of composition or publication of the critical work are given at the beginning of each piece of criticism. Unsigned criticism is preceded by the title of the source in which it appeared. Footnotes are reprinted at the end of each essay or excerpt. In the case of excerpted criticism, only those footnotes that pertain to the excerpted texts are included.

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- A complete **Bibliographical Citation** of the original essay or book precedes each piece of criticism.
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Ai
1947-

(Born Florence Anthony) American poet.

INTRODUCTION

An innovative poet, Ai is known for her dramatic monologues and surrealistic imagery. Her work is often criticized for its sensationalized representations of violent acts.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Ai was born Florence Anthony on October 21, 1947, in Albany, Texas. She describes her ethnicity as half Japanese, one-fourth black, one-eighth Choctaw, and one-sixteenth Irish, although she did not know her own background until she was twenty-six years old, when her mother revealed that Ai's father was a Japanese man with whom she'd had a brief extramarital affair. Ai initially lived in the Texas home of her great-grandparents and later moved with her mother to Las Vegas and San Francisco. She was educated in parochial schools and reports that she was unable to fit in with either the black or the white students. After high school she entered the University of Arizona and embraced the Asian side of her heritage, majoring in Oriental Studies and taking as her pen name Ai, which means *love* in Japanese. She received a B.A. from Arizona in 1969 and a Master of Fine Arts in creative writing from the University of California, Irvine, in 1971.

Ai has received a number of awards, including a Guggenheim Fellowship, a Radcliffe Fellowship, a Massachusetts Arts and Humanities Fellowship, and two National Endowment for the Arts Fellowships. Her 1979 collection, *Killing Floor,* was the Lamont poetry selection of the Academy of American Poets, and her 1986 collection, *Sin,* won the American Book Award from the Before Columbus Foundation. She won the National Book Award for Poetry in 1999 for *Vice: New and Selected Poems.* Ai has held a variety of academic positions, including Visiting Poet at Wayne State University and George Mason University; writer-in-residence at Arizona State University; and visiting associate professor at the University of Colorado at Boulder. She has also worked as an antiques dealer and a jewelry designer. Ai is married to Lawrence Kearney, a poet, and currently lives in Tempe, Arizona.

MAJOR WORKS

Ai's first poetry collection was *Cruelty* (1973), a series of short dramatic monologues featuring speakers from among the poor, both male and female, telling their stories in a flat, unadorned style. The collection includes the individual poems "Abortion," "Tired Old Whore," and "The Country Midwife: A Day." The poems recount incidents involving sex, birth, child abuse, rape, and murder in language that is gritty, even brutal. Ai's second collection, *Killing Floor,* features a variety of speakers, some of them such public figures as Leon Trotsky and Marilyn Monroe, and focuses on themes very similar to those in her first collection. In 1986 she published *Sin,* which further moves from the private to the public realms and features dramatic monologues by such well-known figures as John F. Kennedy, J. Robert Oppenheimer, and Joseph McCarthy. *Fate* (1991) presents speakers who seem to reflect Ai's own predicament as a multi-ethnic woman whose various allegiances to race, class, gender, and ethnicity leave her with a fragmented identity. One of the most controversial poems in *Fate* is "Go," whose speaker is Mary Jo Kopechne, the victim of the Ted Kennedy Chappaquidick incident. Ai's fifth collection, *Greed* (1993), is similar to *Fate* in that the poems are dramatic monologues spoken by various famous and infamous characters such as Lee Harvey Oswald and Ferdinand Marcos, as well as by a variety of anonymous individuals such as a black crack-addicted prostitute and a jealous husband. Ai's most recent volumes of poetry are *Vice: New and Selected Poems* (1999) and *Dread: Poems* (2003). In *Vice,* in addition to her use of such public figures as Monica Lewinsky, David Koresh, and O. J. Simpson as her poem's speakers, Ai also selects as narrators a variety of shady characters—hit men, looters, and rapists—whose subjectivity is typically suppressed in cultural productions. She continues her use of characters drawn less from the pages of history books than from the pages of the newspaper in *Dread,* which features John F. Kennedy, Jr. speaking from beyond the grave and a woman who believes her sister perished in the World Trade Center collapse.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

From the publication of her first collection, Ai's work has been controversial. Some critics have admired her hard-hitting approach to brutal subject matter; others

have criticized her almost casual representations of violence, and have even considered some of her work pornographic. Rob Wilson objects to Ai's use of violence as a way to transcend her own ego: "Ai's vision of poetry is so concerned with transcendence, using other characters to get beyond herself and the body, that she assumes violence as a universal and unconscious premise, as if killing as a means of vision were a fact of life." Claudia Ingram refutes Wilson's claims, insisting that Ai's work does not contain "celebratory representations" of violence and pointing out that her poems "register the violence of the processes in which meanings are produced—the brutal sacrifices that uphold cultural monologics, and the appalling risks that accompany their destabilization."

Ai's use of historical figures as the speakers of her poems has also been a subject of critical debate. For example, her poem "Nothing But Color" deals with the ritual suicide of Yukio Mishima, however, some of the facts of the historical event have been changed. Wilson questions whether this liberty is the right of the artist: "Does the power of the imagination allow the poet to appropriate another's life to her own and even symbolically to restage his death?" Susannah B. Mintz suggests that Ai's use of varying personae, both public and private, reflects her own fragmented condition as a person subject to multiple versions of oppression. "There is no single personal pronoun from which Ai can speak," Mintz claims, and "the result is an unsettling group of poems exalting a cultural compendium of 'I's': figures from politics and religion, comedians and movie stars, men and women lurking at the shadowy, vulgar periphery of an increasingly stratified, materialistic, and violent twentieth-century society." Michele Leavitt, in her analysis of "Go" contends that by having the deceased Mary Jo Kopechne narrate the poem, the poet "interweaves life, death and an afterlife into a believably concurrent form of existence that negates the idea that death is the end of influence." Jeanne Heuving takes issue with the "consistent barrage of negative commentary" Ai's poetry has received "for its perceived narcissistic identifications, gratuitous violence, and amoral vision." According to Heuving, "these very normative judgments fail to regard Ai's complex artistry and ultimately her intensely moral vision."

PRINCIPAL WORKS

Poetry

Cruelty 1973
Killing Floor 1979
Sin 1986
Fate 1991
Greed 1993
Vice: New and Selected Poems 1999
Dread: Poems 2003

CRITICISM

Rob Wilson (essay date winter 1986)

SOURCE: Wilson, Rob. "The Will to Transcendence in Contemporary American Poet, Ai." *Canadian Review of American Studies* 17, no. 4 (winter 1986): 437-48.

[*In the following essay, Wilson discusses the masks Ai employs in her poetry and her efforts to transcend her own ego.*]

> I came not to astonish But to destroy you. Your Jug of cool water? Your Hanker after wings? Your Lech for transcendence?
>
> —Galway Kinnell, "The Supper After the Last"

There is a famous dialectical analysis of the American "lech for transcendence" by Kenneth Burke called "I, Eye, Ay—Concerning Emerson's Early Essay on 'Nature' and the Machinery of Transcendence." Burke's impacted pun of a title suggests the way sublime-hungry Emerson's ego, his first-person *I,* is changed through the self-transcending vision of the imaginative eyeball, his *eye,* into a sustained cry of cosmic affirmation, an *ay.*[1]

The suggestive pen-name of contemporary American poet Florence Ogawa Anthony, Ai, argues the analogous American concern of her whole poetic project: the attempt to transcend her ego, her I, through some act of vision which allows the assuming of a masked identity, another's I and eyes, and yet affirms the power of her own identity over the world of death. Who is Ai under the myriad masks of her poetry? If one were to add to Burke's Emersonian formula for poetic identity the "aiee" of sexual ecstasy, as well as that of the Japanese word "ai" which signifies *love,* one would begin to have some sense of the range and personae of voice in the poet called Ai; and of the dangers her symbolic quest to transcend mere personality entails.

By way of the scant biographical information now available, we know that Ai was born in Tucson, Arizona in 1947; her father was Japanese and her mother "a Black, Choctaw Indian, Irish and German woman from Texas." Deepening the roots of this mixed identity, Ai went on to receive her B.A. in Oriental Studies from the

University of Arizona and an M.F.A. in Creative Writing from the University of California at Irvine. She is married to the poet Lawrence Kearney, and is well known for her powerful and flamboyant readings on the U.S. poetry circuit.

Cruelty, Ai's first book (1973), was acclaimed for a striking array of poetic masks expressed in a terse, highly charged language of emotive force: she allows dwarfs, sharecroppers, prostitutes, crazed and jilted lovers, child beaters, warriors and ordinary persons in various states of ecstasy and grief to have their ungenteel say. For example, a truckstop prostitute in **"Everything: Eloy, Arizona, 1956"** offers her body as the altar of her self-defense:

> He's keys, tires, a fire lit in his belly
> in the diner up the road.
> I'm red toenails, tight blue halter, black slip.
> He's mine tonight. I don't know him.
> He can only hurt me a piece at a time.
>
> (p. 144)

And in **"Hangman,"** the fields of Kansas are illuminated by the seemingly sacred act of public execution:

> He places his foot on the step going down
> and nearby, a scarecrow explodes,
> sending tiny slivers of straw into his eyes.
>
> (p. 124)

"The siloes open their mouths" to receive the bloodshed of this full moral harvest of American violence which is performed in the name (the Lebanese worker thinks) of an ideal cause of "brotherhood."

In her second collection, ***Killing Floor*** (1979), which won the prestigious Lamont Prize in 1978, her cast of masked characters becomes more upscale and allusive, full of literary, mystical, political and historical figures. Ai gives voice to a cast of romantic visionaries like Mishima and Trotsky, heroes at political poles of fascist and revolutionary, yet sharing the same lurch to storm a way into eternity. Both books have been declared works of poetic empathy, transactions of a protean *negative capability* by which the ordinary identity of Ai is seemingly transcended and she enters another self, if only through the time and the symbolic agency of the poem. Ai (and I) becomes a kind of eloquent nothing, and yet she sees beyond the body's confines, as Emerson had urged upon the imperial ego of the poet on his errand of spiritual transformation in the American wilds. As the voice of the crazed colonialist Lopé de Aguirre announces in **"The Gilded Man,"** searching for some idealist El Dorado in the new lands:

> Urzua is dead. Guzman is dead. There is no Spain.
> I'm hunting El Dorado, the Gilded Man.
> When I catch him, I'll cut him up.
> I'll start with his feet
> and give them to you [his daughter] to wear as earrings.
> Talk to me.
> I hear nothing but the monkeys squealing above me.
>
> (p. 48)

Even God as the delusion of an idealistic motive must give way to this visionary will-to-power over the wilderness: "God. The boot heel an inch above your head is mine. . . ." The nature lovers of Keats and Emerson are bypassed by monstrosities of visionary projection which would, somehow, remain moral. Or can one make the ultimate Nietzschean claim for this mask that Ai has effaced herself and all moral judgment of this refigured ego out of existence?

Karl Malkoff has traced the collective ambition in post-confessional American poetry to transcend the autobiographical ego back to sources in Anglo-American Romanticism: to Keats on the negation of the ego through ventriloquized voice, to Browning in his dramatic monologues, to Yeats and his doctrine of the mask, to Pound with his mastery of *Personae,* to Eliot and his geriatric *alter ego,* Prufrock.[2] The best statement of this romantic project of using poetry to transcend the ego remains the letter on poetic identity which Keats wrote to Richard Woodhouse (27 Oct. 1818):

> As to the poetical Character itself (I mean that sort of which, if I am any thing, I am a Member; that sort distinguished from the Wordsworthian or egotistical sublime; which is a thing per se and stands alone) it is not itself—it has no self—it is everything and nothing—It has no character—it enjoys light and shade; it lives in gusto, be it foul or fair, high or low, rich or poor, mean or elevated—. . . . A Poet is the most unpoetical of anything in existence; because he has no Identity—he is continually informing and filling some other Body.

Through an act of imaginative empathy, in which the poet informs the body and voice of another's character, the ego or I of the poet would be negated through the symbolic agency of the poem, and thereby changed fitfully into the perspective of someone else. The ego of the poet may not be the best vehicle of the sublime anymore; but the egos of others can be, high or low, rich or poor, if portrayed as drama, the voice of a separate ego with its own project of desire and need.

Looking back into American Romanticism for origins of Ai's attempt to transcend the personal ego, we are confronted with an even more extreme and to some extent determinizing case of the will to transcend ordinary identity, Emerson's passage on the mystical crossing in *Nature* (1836): "Standing on the bare ground,—my head bathed by the blithe air and uplifted

into infinite space,—all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or parcel of God." The vehicle of transcendence in Keats is other people whereas in Emerson it is nature, but the goal of the poets is the same: to overcome the ego and yet to see all. As an extreme and inner-directed advocate of self-reliance, Emerson could not bring himself, self-empowered son of the Oversoul, to depend upon another's character for his own vision of God; but his larger goal is Keats's romantic one, to annihilate the ego through some act of self-transcending vision which the poem performs.

At first glance, Ai's poetry appears supremely unselfish, as if the ego or autobiographical identity of Ai has been negated through an act of dramatic objectivity that is often astonishing. Consider this often-anthologized lyric in a sharecropper's voice, **"Cuba, 1962"**:

> When the rooster jumps up on the windowsill
> and spreads his red-gold wings,
> I wake, thinking it is the sun
> and call Juanita, hearing her answer,
> but only in my mind.
> I know she is already outside,
> breaking the cane off at ground level,
> using only her big hands.
> I get the machete and walk among the cane,
> until I see her, lying face-down in the dirt.
>
> Juanita, dead in the morning like this.
> I raise the machete—
> what I take from the earth, I give back—
> and cut off her feet.
> I lift the body and carry it to the wagon,
> Where I load the cane to sell in the village.
> Whoever tastes my woman in his candy, his cake,
> tastes something sweeter than this sugar cane;
> it is grief.
> If you eat too much of it, you want more,
> you can never get enough.
>
> (***Cruelty,*** p. 32)

The voice of transfigured grief in the poem is not Ai's, not that of the poetic ego confessing its own desires and needs, but the voice of a separate character, a cane farmer whose poor station in life does not withhold from him the capacity for sublime perception, the metaphor that Juanita is now one with the cane she has picked. That the voice in **"Cuba, 1962"** has moved beyond itself into "another world," a realm of the great souls, is clear from a comment Ai herself makes in her *Ironwood* interview (12 [1978] 27): "The character speaking in **'Cuba'** seems to me a character with 'heart,' a character larger than life, no matter how insignificant his own life is." In other words, the voice of a simple character is still capable of conveying in simple language some glimpse of ecstasy which tradition would call the sublime, a term which is a useful way of describing the structure of **"Cuba"** as it builds from ordinary description to climax and silence. Ai has effaced her ego in the character of another being who mounts, through pathos, to glimpse transcendent perception through an act of cruelty yet of love.

"It's transcendence—that's what I'm striving for in all these poems: no matter what the characters go through, no matter what their end, they mean to live," says Ai about her own project in ***Killing Floor,*** justifying the violence and vision as parts of one whole (*Ironwood,* p. 34). Similarly, she says that she aims to cross "the line that separates the ecstatic visionary from ordinary life" by creating characters who have, in her imagination of them, done so: Aguirre, Zapata, Mishima, Ira Hayes and so forth. The violent act in **"Cuba"** of the farmer's dismembering his dead wife remains for Ai an act of visionary cruelty; through grief and greatness of feeling, the farmer is storming his way into eternity and sublime utterance. Acts of cruelty and violence are often for Ai a means of vision, an enlarging and self-ennobling of the ego by the "ecstatic visionary" consciousness beyond mere selfhood. Even a poor farmer can pass beyond himself through greatness of soul, not so much *ethos* as *pathos,* a quality which Ai can find almost anywhere, as did democratic Emerson and dramatistic Keats, in the souls of other people.

It appears that in the poetry of Ai, then, the ego of the poet has died and been replaced by a fictive I, a mask which is not necessarily the poet's own compound of desire and grief. Her lyrics are notable for the range and depth of their negative capability, Ai's entry into the voices and beings of a virtual circus of masks, a whole cast of characters who are diverse in origin and voice. Is not almost every character, however, given to some act of violence (hence, her titles, ***Cruelty*** and ***Killing Floor***) in which either the self or another person is mutilated from ordinary identity and normal consciousness? We do need to see that such mystical violence is often symbolic, as if some desperate linguistic means to sacramental transformation of the ego. Her characters, masks for Ai, would awaken to higher consciousness, ecstatic vision just this side of the body's slipping into that silent annihilation which we call death.

Has the ego of Ai been transcended through poetry? Paradoxically, I must say no. Ai's work has increasingly become a poetry of unconscious egotism which would annihilate, via symbolic reimagining, the time-bound, distinct egos of other people, a judgment which becomes necessary when reading ***Killing Floor.*** Here Ai takes on a historical and artistic array of masks for her own voice and, in so doing, the inner spiritual intention of her project becomes clear: Ai would transcend her own identity and the rigors of time, even if this means transforming or mutilating the identities of

characters quite distinct from her. Violence is not just Ai's theme; it inheres in the very form of the poem as dramatic monolgue; it drives her to try to see *beyond* the body. All her characters could utter the mystical affirmation which Yukio Mishima (Ai's mask) makes at the climax of his ritualized suicide:

> I start pulling my guts out,
> those silk red cords,
> spiraling skyward,
> and I'm climbing them
> past the moon and the sun,
> past darkness
> into white.
> I mean to live.
>
> **("Nothing But Color")**

Such a spiral upward beyond space and time and the oppositions of good and bad, however, may finally have nothing to do with the historical Mishima. What we have is another allusive expression in dramatic voice of Ai's own will to transcendence and "visionary ecstatic" consciousness; a "lurch into transcendence" which, I will argue, comes out of *Puritan, frontier* and *ethnic* sources in the contradictory American self which Ai symbolically represents.

The most careful analysis of Ai's blatant restaging of history in terms of her own poetic project has been done by Stephen Yenser in a review of ***Killing Floor*** (*Yale Review,* 68 [Summer 1979]), where he writes of the historical distortions toward symbol in **"Nothing But Color"**: "Someone better acquainted with Mishima's life might pronounce on the cannibalism, but anyone will be puzzled to find that the *hari-kiri* in this poem occurs in the speaker's garden, whereas Mishima's took place in the office of a general at an armed forces base." Does the power of the imagination allow the poet to appropriate another's life to her own and even symbolically to restage his death? Yenser's analysis of Ai's version of Trotsky in her title poem is even more compelling: "In the first section she seems to have Trotsky plead for exile (in fact he even had to be carried to the train) and in the third she has him sitting in a bedroom at a 'mirrored vanity' and putting on his wife's maquillage when he is struck from behind (he was in his study, not in front of a mirror, reading an essay the killer had just given him). Are the facts not bizarre enough?" (p. 568). Trotsky is no mere anonymous character, but one of history and destiny; and it is simply an act of egotistical power to rewrite his life in terms of private symbol. Trotsky becomes a cipher in Ai's will to mystical transcendence, but are not the data and dialectics of history too important for such a private trope to live on and mean? Characters are not corpses to be used at poetic will.

Ai's characters in ***Killing Floor*** do share (her) thematic obsession: novelists, socialists, revolutionaries, foot soldiers, war heroes, conquistadors, all are struggling to enter that blissful state of consciousness which Lopé de Aguirre calls *El Dorado* or *Vera Cruz* in **"The Gilded Man,"** the poem about the ruthless quest for the spiritualized lucre of the New World which finishes ***Killing Floor*** on a note of sublime terror. Such a climax of ecstasy, which we have seen in detail in **"Cuba,"** is characteristic of the form of *any* Ai lyric, because her characters (like Mishima) would enter some consciousness of transcendence which traditionally has been called the sublime. Her worldly means to this end is violence, barely ritualized acts of cruelty, obsession and love, as in Lopé de Aguirre's murder of his own daughter, Vera Cruz, after his quest for El Dorado has failed:

> I unsheathe my dagger. Your mouth opens.
> I can't hear you.
> I want to. Tell me you love me.
> You cover your mouth with your hands.
> I stab you, then fall beside your body.
> Vera Cruz. See my skin covered with gold dust
> and tongues of flame,
> transfigured by the pentecost of my own despair.

Through Aguirre's project of desire and despair, Ai gives voice to American transcendental violence at its bloodiest and most sensational, to that Puritan and frontier myth central to American possession of the land which Richard Slotkin aptly calls "regeneration through violence." Through violence, Ai's voices would possess a visionary frontier, a space of powerful vision which would abolish history.

In writing about other characters like Kawabata, Mishima and Trotsky as symbols of would-be regenerative violence, however, Ai has not only annihilated her own ego, she has annihilated *them* as distinct human beings with separate histories and drives. Historical biography is reduced to poetic autobiography, as if characters from history were merely legends in some Book of Saints as narrated by the poet Ai. If she writes "For the Ghosts" (as her dedication claims), she does not write *as* them; consequently, the act of poetic empathy has become a distortion in which history means nothing but symbol, and the symbols are all too alike. The tones of the voices are predictable, as are the visionary plots, especially in ***Killing Floor*** where the characters are no longer anonymous or unique as they were in ***Cruelty.*** Her third collection, due out in 1986, would need to remedy this predictability of theme and form, her thematics of violence and the sacred, if her symbolist method is to progress beyond its prior resolutions.

These dramatic monologues are exciting, stunning in detail, one might even say intoxicating in the sublime sense that both poet and reader are caught up in another's will to ecstatic vision; history, however, is too important for such fictive appropriations of lives by the

poet. Ai is indeed a poet genuinely gifted in her goals and verbal means. Yet her "tyrannous eye" of selfhood, which Emerson urged for the American poet in the intoxicated tropes of "The Poet," can mask the poet's evasively masked "mean egotism," which would use nature and character as a "colossal cipher" for what John Ashbery terms in *Three Poems* that monodrama of salvation. The world of other beings becomes a "cipher" to such tyranny of the will to reimagine nature in one's own beloved image. Another human being is too separate, too other, too delicate a biology of consciousness, however, to wind up as a cipher in a song of the visionary self. Ai, who first suppressed her own ego in poetry, has now so much taken over voices in her poems that nothing is left on the stage of history but her own visionary imagination. She has transfigured history into symbols of the poet, Ai, but history remains real and demanding, as Georg Lukacs warned symbol-generating modernists in *Realism in Our Time* (1964): "realism is not one style among others, it is the basis of literature." However preoccupied with language and symbol poetry might get, poetry begins in life and life is real, whatever we might make of its particulars.

The violence which preoccupies Ai indeed has a sacred goal: she wants vision, self-transcendence, mystical insight as her poems and comments show. Such a transfiguration through bloodshed is captured in the lines from Charles Simic which open ***Cruelty***:

> Whoever swings an ax
> Knows the body of man
> Will again be covered with fur.

As Burke argued in his analysis of Emerson's *Nature,* there can be both poetic transcendence *upward* and transcendence *downward*: man can become a saint or god (as Aguirre would), or he can become an animal or savage (as the ax-swinger in Simic's poem would). By presenting voices of low vision, like rapists and child beaters, and voices of sublime vision, like Kawabata and Mishima, Ai would transcend both downward and upward, as if each violent character shared the same visionary need to see beyond the body. Is the violence of Mishima akin to that of the wife beater? In ***Killing Floor*** it becomes clear that the victims who must be sacrificed for the sacred to occur are other human beings who must give up their identities in Ai's drive to articulate the will to the sacred in art, politics, life.[3] Need the communist visionary, Trotsky, become a bloody, glamorous figure of self-transcendence on a par with Hollywood's own, Marilyn Monroe (**"She Didn't Even Wave"**)? Or, worse yet, a murderous punk (**"The Kid"**)? Is history just a warehouse of symbols? Only if we historicize Ai's will to transcendence, by situating her project in relation to the Romantic dialectics of self-transcendence, can we comprehend this all-too-American will to abolish history into vision.

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Kenneth Burke, in his analysis of dialectical transcendence in Emerson, sees transcendence as a process in which there is not only a victim but a *passage,* a movement from here (nature) to there (spirit), by means of a poetic trope (for Emerson, metaphor). Almost all the masks of Ai are informed with such a lurch toward transcendence, a will to go beyond the body and ordinary consciousness, be it through ecstasy or death. (***Killing Floor*** is filled not only with murders, but with suicides.) Her means are what Burke would call "tragic": what gets left behind is not so much a concept or term (Emerson, for example, passes from nature as *commodity* to nature as *spirit*), but a human victim who must be sacrificed through some cruel act of love, as in **"Cuba,"** where the wife becomes a victim of the husband's urge to express his proletarian rage and grief. This can make for poetry at its most tragic and sublime.

If the plot of poetry is to use "language as symbolic action" (Burke), then the plot of Ai's symbolizing has one visionary goal: to get beyond selfhood. With so much visionary violence in ***Killing Floor,*** the stage is bountifully strewn with corpses as in a revenge tragedy, but without enough dramatic presentation of motives and values as in Sam Shepard. Nevertheless, as Fredric Jameson has shown us in his Marxian re-reading of Burke in *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (1981), merely symbolic action remains an *action,* an imaginative praxis wrought upon the contradictions of history as a means to resolve them by symbolic interpretation. The idealized violence figured into Ai's poetry is that of American history in its march over the wilderness and the racial *other,* something which she must feel deeply as one of marginalized ethnic origins.

If we grant such a method, what then is her genre? Are we purged of violent emotion, as in tragedy, or are we absorbed into the ecstatic consciousness of the visionary poet, as in the sublime? I think that in Ai's poetry it is the latter structure of emotion that prevails: we are caught up in another's vision of violence, and must imagine some transfiguration of means (the body) taking place if we would, like Kawabata, seize the image of "this moment, death without end." As Burke remarks of Emerson, such poets storming toward the sublime "can select just about anything, no matter how lowly and tangible, to stand for it," the "overall term-of-terms or title-of-titles" which is everywhere and nowhere, in everything and in nothing: that flitting of vision Ai calls El Dorado (a place), death (a state of ego loss), or God (the union of souls beyond the body) (p. 190). There is killing and cruelty on the floor of Ai's poetry, *killing* both literal and symbolic as a means to transfigure the body into something other and visionary, which is the goal sought by Mishima, for example, in his ritual

suicide in Japan. Ai's vision of poetry is so concerned with transcendence, using other characters to get beyond herself and the body, that she assumes violence as a universal and unconscious premise, as if killing as a means of vision were a fact of life. She refuses explicitly to moralize violence, but her imagination would validate its use for visionary ends, a dangerous (and deeply American) myth indeed. The poem cannot escape the ethical judgment that killing is killing, however, whatever urge or origin it would symbolize. Ai's atavism is not so much subjective as structural, however, the reflex of a poetic sensibility to a climate of barely idealized warfare.

For Ai, the violence is a mystical given of her art; she might well find another argument from cultural mythology to justify this concern with the body mutilated and transfigured, with the symbol of Christ crucified as sacred victim and savior. Ai was raised a Catholic (she wrote her first poem at age twelve, pretending to be a Christian martyr who was going to die the next day—her first vision-hungry monologue), and the Christian sense of the Incarnation as a bloody, sacred fact might well be influential upon her own poetic imagery, which would link violence and vision, as in the lines which close **"Guadalajara Hospital"** on a brutal note: "Virgin Mary, help me. Save me. / Tear me apart with your holy, invisible hands." Such a dismemberment of the body as a sacred act occurs, symbolically, in the act of Holy Communion; and Ai's poetic images often would aim in this direction of the body engorged, brutalized, transfigured in a private ceremony of grace.

Another justification for the violence in Ai's work has been alluded to earlier: the all-too-American preoccupation with regeneration through violent means, the central *mythos* of the confrontation between Indian and Christian cultures and ideologies. In Puritan and frontier narratives, a hero emerges, like Daniel Boone, whose violence against the Indians and animals is yet a sacred act of possession of the land: "an American hero is the lover of the spirit of the wilderness, and his acts of love and sacred affirmation are acts of violence against that spirit and her avatars."[4] However deep and archetypal this plot of initiation through projected darkness, the physical conditions of American history give this myth special prominence for American writers; and Ai is working in American mythology when she would attempt to connect violence of the body with regeneration of the spirit. Her poetry is often so unconscious in its images and drives that one must still ask, is the violence there as sensation or as symbol? I admit that one would at times have to answer, the latter; but the literal dimension of the bloodshed in her poetic imagery cannot be casually dismissed. The urban streets are too full of violence for poets to indulge in similar sensations through stunning artifacts beyond history and ethics. Another motive must haunt Ai. As a person of mixed ethnic origin, Ai might well explore, through poetic symbols, the violence wrought against her ancestors by the dominant, murderously abstract Christians. In this more dialectical view, her poetry would become an attempt to understand the visionary violence of religious and political fanatics, through imagined masks which reveal and conceal her autobiographical interests. The violence is not hers, but that of a racist, class-structured America betraying democratic ideals. Her body becomes the site of an ongoing wound—yellow, black, and ready to draw blood.

The sepia photograph on the cover of ***Killing Floor*** is a case of such semiotic masking of the self in an image which both reveals and conceals Ai. Her cover of a young girl with a rifle, gun and bandoliers of bullets staring meanly, plaintively, at the reader was explained away by Ai, during an InterArts Hawaii symposium on her work in June 1979, as an interesting costume, as if she picked this one suit to wear from a myriad of others without any special moral or political significance. Clothing, however, like language, does not work like this; each *parole* of choice takes place within a system of *langue* which gives that single act meaning by difference. It is as if Ai, like an Isabel Archer, wants absolute freedom from social systems of signification that would claim that a child with a gun is a revolutionary in appearance (she is called Rosebud Morales in the text), that Trotsky stands for distinct political positions which cannot be falsified at will, that violence can often be immoral, that even the most self-reliant ego wears fashion-coded clothes and talks in the commonplace language of the tribe. Ai wants the masks of ***Killing Floor*** to have no clear social significance, to be arbitrary, beautiful, doomed in a singular way. Language, like fashion, however, does not work in this private way, no matter how visionary the poet or her poems. The monologues of ***Killing Floor*** reveal that Ai has reached a symbolic extreme. Can she move beyond her own poetic mythology, as did a Merwin or a Stevens?

Ai would enact the symbolic language of poetry as if it could function in latter days as the symbolic language of religion. Her cast of characters hunger for some visionary breakthrough. As Ai commented on ***Killing Floor,*** "I'm dealing with past and present mystical beliefs—that line that separates the ecstatic visionary state from ordinary life—and saying 'look, it is as simple as lifting your hand, this passage into another life.'"[5] Nothing is got for nothing, however, the Emersonian hard principle of *compensation* ruling in poetry as in life; and her passage into other lives is not all that simple or idealistic, as this essay has attempted to map. Nevertheless, Ai's goal remains the romantic, visionary one in which art would serve a quasi-religious "function of transcendence" in a faithless, scientistic age which devalues symbolic language as the mumbo-jumbo