

1 What Do We Mean When We Talk about Voice in Texts?

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...instead of considering it our task to "dispose of" any ambiguity... we rather consider it our task to study and clarify the resources of ambiguity.

—Kenneth Burke (1969, xix)

It's hard to stop people from using the word *voice* when they talk about writing, but serious objections come from three points:

- Many traditional writing teachers have long been saying, in effect, "Don't let students confuse writing and speaking. They are very different media. One of the big problems with student writing is too much speech or orality in it."
- Derrida calls voice a major problem in our understanding of discourse—the idea that voice underlies writing and that writing always implies the "real presence" of a person or a voice. This objection has spread beyond people who identify themselves as deconstructionists or poststructuralists.
- People committed to the social construction of knowledge, of language, and of the self tend to object to the concept of voice because it so often seems to imply a naïve model of the self as unique, single, and unchanging.

The rise of semiotics and sign theory in linguistics and literary criticism represents the emergence of a visual metaphor for discourse. "Text" has become the preferred word not just for discourse in general but in fact for anything that carries meaning (e.g., the textuality of clothing or the semiotics of driving). Derrida was angry that linguists like Saussure considered speech to be the paradigm form of language. Therefore if one wants to emphasize voice or to use the example of voice to represent discourse, one must swim against the tide of the dominant visual metaphor and emphasize a sound metaphor.

Yet the biggest problem for voice as a critical term may come from its fans. The term has been used in such a loose and celebratory way as to mean almost anything. It's become a kind of warm fuzzy word: people say that writing has voice if they like it or think it is good or has some virtue that is hard to pin down. We're in trouble if we don't know what we mean by the term.

So my effort in this essay is to be as precise as I can in distinguishing between different senses of voice ("clarifying the resources of ambiguity"). In the first section I will treat the literal, physical voice. Then I will describe five senses of voice as it applies to writing: (1) audible voice (the sounds in a text); (2) dramatic voice (the character or implied author in a text); (3) recognizable or distinctive voice; (4) voice with authority; (5) resonant voice or presence. By making these distinctions I think I can confine most of the dispute to that fifth meaning—the only meaning that requires a link between the known text and the unknown actual author. That is, I think I can show that the first four senses of voice in writing are sturdy, useful, and relatively noncontroversial.

Literal Voice: Observations about the Human Voice

When people speak of voice in writing or of someone "achieving voice" in general or in their life (e.g., in Belenky et al. 1986), they are using a metaphor. This metaphor is so common that perhaps it will one day become literal—as "leg of the table" has become a literal phrase. Once you start listening for the word voice, it's amazing how often you find it in books and articles and reviews—especially in titles. Sometimes the writer is consciously using the term to make some point about writing or psychology, but more often the term is just used in a loosely honorific poetic way. When there is so much metaphorical talk about voice, I find it intellectually cleansing to remind myself that it *is* a metaphor and to acquaint myself better with the literal term—and even try to immerse myself better in the experience of the literal thing itself, the human voice. If this were a workshop, it would be good to do some talking, reciting, singing, and other exercises in orality—and stop and see what we notice.

Let me put down here, then, some literal facts about the human voice. These are not quite "innocent facts" since I want them to show why voice has become such a suggestive and resonant term. But I hope you will agree that they are "true facts."

- Voice is produced by the body. To talk about voice in writing is to import connotations of the body into the discussion—and by implication, to be interested in the role of the body in writing.
- Almost always, people learn to speak before they learn to write. Normally we learn speech at such an early age that we are not aware of the learning process. Speech habits are laid down at a deep level. Also, speaking comes before writing in the development of cultures.
- We can distinguish two dimensions to someone's "voice": the *sound* of their voice and the *manner* or style with which they speak. The first is the quality of noise they make based as it were on the physical "instrument" they are "playing"; and the second is the kind of "tunes, rhythms, and styles" they play on their instrument.
- We identify and recognize people by their voices—usually even when they have a cold or over a bad phone connection. We usually recognize people by voice even after a number of years. Something constant persists despite the change. Of course there are exceptions—such as when some boys go through adolescence.
- People have demonstrably unique voices: "voiceprints" are evidently as certain as fingerprints for identification. This might suggest the analogy of our bodies being genetically unique, but our voiceprints are less dependent upon genes than our bodies.
- Despite the unique and recognizable quality of an individual's voice, we all display enormous variation in how we speak from occasion to occasion. Sometimes we speak in monotone, sometimes with lots of intonation. And we use different "tones" of voice at different times, e.g., excited, scared, angry, sad. Furthermore, we sometimes speak self-consciously or "artificially," but more often we speak with no attention or even awareness of how we are speaking. The distinction between a "natural" and "artificial" way of talking is theoretically vexed, but in fact listeners and speakers often agree in judgments as to whether someone was speaking naturally or artificially on a given occasion.
- Our speech often gives a naked or candid picture of how we're feeling as when our voice quavers with fear or unhappiness or lilts with elation or goes flat with depression. People sometimes detect our mood after hearing nothing but our "hello" on the telephone. Our moods often show through in our writing too—at least to very sensitive readers; but it's easier to hide how we're feeling in our writing. We can

ponder and revise the words we put on paper. Speaking is harder to control, usually less self-conscious, closer to "autonomic" behavior. Cicero says the voice is a picture of the mind. People commonly identify someone's voice with *who* he or she is—with their character just as it is common to identify one's self with one's body. (The word "person" means both body and self—and it suggests a link between the person and the sound of the voice. "Persona" was the word for the mask that Greek actors wore to amplify their voices [per + sona].)

- Audience has a big effect on voice. (a) Partly it's a matter of *imitating* those around us: just as we pick up words and phrases from those we spend time with, or pick up a regional accent, so we often unconsciously imitate the ways of talking that we constantly hear. (b) Partly it's a matter of *responding* to those around us. That is, our voice tends to change as we speak to different people—often without awareness. We tend to speak differently to a child, to a buddy, to someone we are afraid of. My wife says she can hear when I'm speaking to a woman on the telephone. Some listeners seem to bring out more intonation in our speech (see Bakhtin 1976 on "choral support").

- There are good actors, on and off the stage, who can convincingly make their voices seem to show whatever feeling or character they want.

- People can become just as comfortable in writing as in speaking, indeed we are sometimes deeply awkward, tangled, and even blocked in our speaking.

- Though voice is produced by the body, it is produced out of *breath*: something that is not the body and which is shared or common to us all—but which always issues from inside us and is a sign of life. This may partly explain why so many people have been so tempted to invest voice with "deep" or even "spiritual" connotations.

- Voice involves sound, hearing, and time; writing or text involves sight and space. The differences between these modalities are profound and interesting. (To try to characterize these modalities, however, as Ong has done at length, is speculative, so I must resort briefly to parentheses here. Sight seems to tell us more about the outsides of things, sound more about the insides of things. In evolution, sight is the most recent sense modality to become dominant in humans—and is dealt with in the largest and most recent parts of the human brain. Sight seems to be most linked to rationality—in our brain and our metaphors—e.g., "Do you see?" But there are crucial dangers in going along with Ong and others in making such firm and neat associations between certain *mentalities* and orality and literacy—especially for the teaching of writing [see Elbow 1985].)

- Spoken language has more semiotic channels than writing. That is, speech contains more channels for carrying meaning, more room for the play of difference. The list of channels is impressive. For example, there is volume (loud and soft), pitch (high and low), speed (fast and slow), accent (yes or no), intensity (relaxed and tense). And note that these are not just binary items, for in each case there is a huge range of subtle *degrees* all the way between extremes. In addition, in each case there are patterned sequences: for example tune is a pattern of pitches; rhythm is a pattern of slow and fast and accent. Furthermore, there is a wide spectrum of timbres (breathy, shrill, nasal, and so forth); there are glides and jumps; there are pauses of varying lengths. Combinations of *all* of these factors make the possibilities dizzying. And *all* these factors carry meaning. Consider the example of the subtle or not so subtle pause as we are speaking, the little intensity or lengthening of a syllable—and all the other ways we complicate the messages we speak. We can't do those things in writing. (See Bolinger 1986 for a masterful and scholarly treatment of all dimensions of intonation in speech.)

It's not that writing is poverty stricken as a semiotic system. But writing has to achieve its subtleties with fewer resources. A harpsichord cannot make gradations of volume the way a piano can, but harpsichordists use subtle cues of timing to communicate the *kind* of thing that pianos communicate with volume. Mozart had fewer harmonic resources to play with than Brahms. He had to do a lot with less. To write well is also to do a lot with less. If we are angry, we sometimes press harder with the pen or break the pencil lead or *hit* the keys harder—or write the words all in a rush. In such a mood our speech would probably sound very angry, but none of these physical behaviors shows in our writing.

Consider the many ways we can say the sentence, "Listen to me"—from angry to fond—or in fact with a whole range of modes of anger. With writing, our options are comparatively small. We can underline or use all caps; we can end with a comma, a period, a question mark, an exclamation mark. We can create pauses by using the ellipsis sign. There are other textual resources of course—such as varying the spacing, sizing, or color of letters and words, playing with the shaping of letters and words, and so forth—but these are considered "informal" and inappropriate to "literate" writing. (If we are writing by hand, we can let our anger or serenity show through quite "graphically." For some reason, we seem to have loosened the conventions for writing on computers—and allowed in more graphical play.) Perhaps the main resource in writing is word choice: choose different words, put them in different orders, set a context by what comes before or afterwards to affect how readers will experience any given sentence. These are the ways we convey significations in writing that we convey effortlessly in speech. In writing, we must do more with fewer channels. (See Brower 1962, 58-74, for an exploration of how poets add to the resources of written language by the use of meter, line, and stanza.)

Voice in Writing: A Family of Related Meanings

People have voices; radios, telephones, TV sets, and tape recorders emit voices. Texts have no voices; they are silent. We can only talk about voice in writing by resorting to metaphor. It's my argument that this is a metaphor worth using, but we can't use it well unless we untangle the differences within a family of five related meanings that people imply when they talk about voice in writing: audible voice; dramatic voice; recognizable or distinctive voice; voice with authority; and resonant voice or presence.

(1) Audible Voice in Writing

All texts are literally silent, but most readers experience some texts as giving off more sense of sound—more of the illusion as we read that we are *hearing* the words. Robert Frost (1917) insists that this is not just a virtue but a necessity: "A dramatic necessity goes deep into the nature of the sentence.... All that can save them is the speaking tone of voice somehow entangled in the words and fastened to the page for the ear of the imagination" ("Introduction").

How is it, then, that some texts have this audible voice? We have to sneak up on the answer by way of two facts I cited in the previous section: that most people have spoken longer and more comfortably than they have written, and that speaking has more channels of meaning than writing. As a result, when most people encounter a text—a set of words that just sit there silently on the page with no intonation, rhythm, accent, and so forth—they automatically *project aurally* some speech sounds onto the text. Given how conditioning and association work, most people cannot help it. Our most frequent and formative experiences with language have involved hearing speech.

In fact, people are virtually incapable of reading without nerve activity in the throat as though to speak—usually even *muscular* activity. We joke about people who move their lips as they read, but this movement is common even among the sophisticated and educated—and many poets insist that it is a travesty to read otherwise. (Have researchers checked out the *hearing* nerves while people read? I'll bet the circuits are busy.) Silent reading must be learned and is relatively recent. St. Augustine tells in his *Confessions* how amazed he was to see Ambrose reading without saying the words out loud.

In short, hearing a text is the norm. We are conditioned to hear words, and the conditioning continues through life. Thus the fruitful question is not, "Why do we hear *some* texts," but rather, "Why *don't* we hear *all* texts?"

There are two main things that prevent us from hearing written words. The most obvious barriers come from the text itself: certain texts resist our conditioned habit to hear. The writer has chosen or arranged words so that it is hard or impossible to say them, and as a result we seem to experience them as hard to hear. This further illustrates the mediation of voice in hearing: for of course, strictly speaking, we can *hear* any word at all. But when written words are easy to say, especially if they are characteristic of idiomatic speech, we tend to hear them more; when written words are awkward or unidiomatic for speech, we tend to hear them less.

People produce unsayable writing in many ways. Some poets, for example, want to block sound and exploit vision (as in concrete poetry, some poems by e. e. cummings, and some L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Poetry). Much legal and bureaucratic writing is unidiomatic and unsayable and thus tends to be unheard because the writers so often create syntax by a process of "constructing" or roping together units (often jargon or even boilerplate units) in a way that has nothing to do with speech. Some scholarly writing is unsayable for various reasons. (A certain amount of technical and difficult terminology may be unavoidable; and consciously or not scholars may want to sound learned or even keep out the uninitiated.) And of course many unskilled writers also lose all contact with the process of speech or utterance as they write: they stop so often in the middle of a phrase to wonder or worry about a word, to look up its spelling, or to change it to one that sounds more impressive, that they lose their syntactic thread and thereby produce many sentences that are wrong or completely unidiomatic.

But we can't blame inaudible writing only on awkward language or ungainly writers. There is a larger reason—culturally produced—why we often don't hear a voice in writing. Our culture of literacy has inculcated in most of us a habit of working actively to keep the human voice out of our texts when we write.

Notice, for example, the informal writing of adolescents or of people who are just learning the conventions of writing. Notice how often they use the language of speech. In addition they often use striking textual devices that are explicitly designed to convey some vividly audible features of speech—some of the music and drama of the voice: pervasive underlining—sometimes double or triple; three or four exclamation marks or question marks at once; pervasive all-caps; oversized letters, colors, parenthetical slang asides "(NOT!!)". (I'm sure I'm not alone in using too many underlinings in my rough drafts—as I'm trying to speak my emphases onto the page—and so I'm always having to get rid of them as I revise and try to find other means to give the emphasis I want.)

What interests me is how unthinkingly we all go along with the assumption that these textual practices are wrong for writing. That is, most of us are unconscious of how deeply our culture's version of literacy has involved a decision to keep voice out of writing, to maximize the difference between speech and writing—to prevent writers from using even those few crude markers that could capture more of the subtle and not so subtle semiotics of speech. Our version of literacy requires people

to distance their writing behavior further from their speaking behavior than the actual modalities require. So when Derrida tries to remove connotations of voice from writing (though he's not saying, "Stop all that informal language and that underlining and putting things in all caps!"), he is nevertheless giving an unnecessary fillip to a steamroller long at work in our version of literacy.

Thus it is *not* lack of skill or knowledge that keeps an audible voice out of the writing of so many poor writers. It's their worry about conforming to our particular conventions of writing and their fear of mistakes. Unskilled writers who are *not* worried—usually unschooled writers—tend to write prose that is very audible and speech-like. Here is a first grader writing a large story:

One day, well if there was a day. There was sand and dust and rocks and stones and some other things. And it was a thunderclaps! And a planet began to rise. And they called it Earth. And do you know what? It rained and rained and rained for thirty days in the big holes. And see we began to grow. And the first animal was a little dinosaur... Don't listen to the newspaperman, all that about the sun. Don't be afraid because the sun will last for ever. That's all there is. (Calkins 1986, 49. Of course this is a transcription of what the child wrote in "invented spelling," i.e., "1 day wel if thar was a day...." And the text was only half the story: it went along with a series of vivid drawings.)

The very term "illiterate writing," as it is commonly used, tends in fact to imply that the writing suffers from being too much like speech. The culture of school and literacy seems to work *against* our tendency to write as we speak or to hear sounds in a text. (An important exception: our culture sanctions more audible writing in poetry and fiction and literary nonfiction—perhaps because of the stronger or more recent links to orality in these forms.)

So far I have been focusing on the question of how speech intonation gets into writing. But we mustn't forget the important prior question: how does intonation get into speech in the first place? For of course sometimes our speech *lacks* intonation. Sometimes we speak in a monotone; some people put more "expression" into their speech than others. Bakhtin (1976) focuses on intonation. He argues that intonation often carries the most important meaning in any discourse—meaning that may not be carried by the lexical, semantic meaning. As he puts it, intonation is the point where language intersects with life. And he points out that we often lose intonation in our speaking if we lack "choral support" from listeners—that is, if we have an audience that doesn't share our values. (He doesn't point out that sometimes we get our dander up in the face of an alien or oppositional audience and actually raise our *voice* and thus our intonation.)

I sense even a gender issue here. Do not women in our culture tend to use more "expression" or intonation in their speech than men—more variation in pitch, accent, rhythm and so forth?—men tending on average to be a bit more tight lipped and monotone? A recent extensive study shows that women even in writing use more exclamation marks than men (Rubin and Greene 1992, 22). Perhaps the culture of literate writing is more inhospitable to women than to men.

Indeed, perhaps Derrida attacks voice so vehemently *because* he is living at a cultural moment when the old antipathy to voice in writing is beginning to fade and writing is more and more invaded by voice. (I know this is not his point.) What McLuhan and Ong call "secondary orality" is surely taking a tall in writing. Even academic writing is much more open to informal oral features.

Despite the two formidable barriers to audibility in writing (frequently unsayable writing and a culture that wants it different from speech), most humans come at writing with echoes of speech in their ears. We hear a text if it gives us half a chance. The onus is on people who object to the idea of voice in writing to show that hearing the words isn't a pervasive fact of reading.

Thus, "audible voice" is a necessary critical term because it points to one of the main textual features that affects how we respond to writing. Other things being equal, most readers prefer texts that they hear—that have audible voice. After all, when we *hear* the text, we can benefit from all those nuances and channels of communication that speech has and that writing lacks. Of course I don't mean to deny that sometimes people find it useful to produce a voiceless, faceless text—to give a sense that these words were never uttered but just ineluctably exist with authority from everywhere and nowhere ("All students will ...")—and thus try to suppress any sense that there might be a voice or person behind them. Naturally, not all readers *agree* about whether a text is audible. But there is at least as much agreement about the audibility of a text or passage as there is about the "structure" or "organization" of it—and we assume the usefulness of those critical concepts. A fruitful area for research lies here: What are the features of texts that many readers find audible? How much agreement do we get about audibility of texts—and among what kind of readers?¹

(2) *Dramatic Voice in Writing*

Let me start again from a fact about literal voice. We identify people by their spoken voices—often even when we haven't talked to them in years. In fact we often identify someone's voice with what they are like. I don't mean to claim too much here—I'm not yet touching on voice and identity. I don't mean that we always believe that someone's voice fits their character. After all, we sometimes say of someone we know: "He always sounds more confident than he really is." My point is simply that we do tend to read a human quality or characteristic into a voice. Even in that example, we are reading *confidence* into a voice in the very act of deciding that the person is *not* confident.

The same process occurs even with people we've never met before. If we hear someone talk for more than a few minutes, we tend to hear character in his or her way of speaking. Again, the negative case clinches my point: we are struck when we *cannot* hear character: "She spoke so guardedly that you couldn't tell anything about what she was like" or even, "She sounded like a guarded kind of person."

Therefore it would be peculiar—habit or conditioning being what it is—if people *didn't* hear character or dramatic voice in written texts since they so habitually hear it in speech. And in fact I've simply been trying in the last two paragraphs to sneak up by a pathway of everyday empiricism on what has become a commonplace of literary criticism—at least since the New Critics and Wayne Booth: that there is always an implied author or dramatic voice in *any* written text. New Critics like to describe any piece of prose in terms of the "speaker" (Brower 1962). Where there is language, insist the New Critics, there is drama. Of course the speaker or implied author may not be the real author; in fact the New Critics brought in this terminology in order to heighten the *distinction* between the character implied by the text and the actual writer.

My point is this: when we acknowledge that every text has an implied author, we are acknowledging that every text has a character or dramatic voice. Indeed, students usually do better at finding and describing the implied author in a text when we use the critical term *dramatic voice* and invite them to use their ears by asking them, "What kind of voice or voices do you hear in this essay or story or poem?" (or to ask them about their own writing

with the classic question that William Coles and others use so well: "Is that the kind of person you want to sound like?").

Of course the voice may be hard to hear. For example we may read certain wooden or tangled texts and say, "There's *no one* in there." But the New Critics have trained us to look again—listen—again and always find a speaker. It may just be "the bureaucratic speaker" hiding behind conventional forms, but it is a speaker. And Bakhtin continues this training—helping us hear *multiple voices* even when it looks at first like monologue.

Let me illustrate dramatic voice with a passage where D. H. Lawrence (1951) is talking about Melville in *Moby Dick*:

The artist was so *much* greater than the man. The man is rather a tiresome New Englander of the ethical mystical-transcendentalist sort: Emerson, Longfellow, Hawthorns, etc. So unrelieved, the solemn ass even in humour. So hopelessly *au grand serieux* you feel like saying: Good God, what does it matter? If life is a tragedy, or a farce, or a disaster, or anything else, what do I care! Let life be what it likes. Give me a drink, that's what I want just now.

For my part, life is so many things I don't care what it is. It's not my affair to sum it up. Just now it's a cup of tea. This morning it was wormwood and gall. Hand me the sugar.

One wearies of the *grand serieux*. There's something false about it. And that's Melville. Oh, dear, when the solemn ass brays! brays! brays! (157-58)

Lawrence's dramatic voice here is vivid: the sound of a brash, opinionated person who likes to show off and even shock. If we are critically naive we might say (echoing Lawrence himself), "And that's Lawrence." If we are more critically prudent we will say, "Notice the ways Lawrence constructs his dramatic voice and creates a role or persona. We sense him taking pleasure in striking this pose. It's a vivid role but let's not assume this is the 'real' Lawrence—or even that there is such a thing as a 'real' Lawrence." (Of course in saying this we would also be echoing Lawrence—in his dictum, "Never trust the teller, trust the tale.")

Compare the following passage by the Chicago critic, R. S. Crane (1951):

...a poet does not write poetry but individual poem. And these inevitably, as finished wholes, instances of one or another poetic kind, differentiated not by any necessities of the linguistic instrument of poetry but primarily by the nature of the poet's conception, as finally embodied in his poem of a particular form to be achieved through the representation, in speech used dramatically or otherwise, of some distinctive state of feeling, of oral choice, or action, complete in itself and productive of a certain emotion or complex of emotions in the reader. (96)

Crane has a less *vivid* dramatic voice here than Lawrence, but anyone who is following and entering into this admittedly more difficult prose (and such a short snippet makes it hard to do that) can sense a character here too. I hear a learned builder of distinctions, careful and deliberate and precise—and someone who takes pleasure in building up syntactic architecture. But because his prose sounds less like a person talking—it's more "constructed" than "uttered" in syntax—readers may disagree more about the character of the speaker than in the case of Lawrence. Such disagreements do not, however, undermine the well-ensconced critical notion of an implied author in any text.

Let me try to sharpen *dramatic voice* and *audible voice* as critical terms by comparing them in these two samples. For most readers, Lawrence's words probably have more audible voice than Crane's. Notice in fact how Lawrence heightens the audible or spoken effect by embedding bits of tacit dialogue and minidrama. He says, "You feel like saying..." so that what follows, "Good God, what does it matter?" and so forth is really a little speech in a different voice, and thus in implied quotation marks. Similarly, when he writes "Hand me the sugar," he's setting up a mini *scene-on-stage* that dramatizes the mood he's evoking.

But Crane's prose is not without audible voice: he starts out with a crisply balanced pronouncement—something pronounced ("a poet does not write poetry but individual poems"). And the second sentence begins with a strikingly audible interrupted phrase or "parenthetical" ("And these are inevitably, as finished wholes..."). But as he drifts from syntactic utterance to architectural construction, I find his words increasingly unidiomatic of anything ever spoken and difficult to say and hear.

So, whereas a text can have more or less audible voice, shall we say the same of dramatic voice? Yes and no. On the one hand, the critical world agrees that every text is 100 percent chock full of implied author. Even if the dramatic voice is subtle or hard to hear, even if there are multiple and inconsistent dramatic voices in a text, the word from Booth to Bakhtin is that the text is nothing but dramatic voices. But common sense argues the other way too, and this view shows itself most clearly in the everyday writerly or teacherly advice: "Why do you keep your voice or character so hidden here? Why not allow it into your writing."²

So I would assert the same conclusion here as I did about audible voice. Just as it is natural and inevitable to hear *audible* voice in a text unless something stops us, so too with dramatic voice: we hear character in discourse unless something stops us.

(3) *Recognizable or Distinctive Voice in Writing*

Writers, like composers or painters, often develop styles that are recognizable and distinctive. And it is common for both popular and academic critics and writers themselves to go one step further and not just talk about a writer finding "a" distinctive voice but "finding *her* voice."

There is nothing to quarrel with here. After all, writing is behavior, and it's hard for humans to engage in *any* behavior repeatedly without developing a habitual way of doing it—a style—that becomes recognizable. Perhaps the most striking example is the physical act of writing: handwriting itself (thus the force of the concept of "signature"). And we see the same thing in walking, tooth brushing, whatever. We can often recognize someone by how they walk—even how they stand—when we are too far away to recognize them by any other visual feature. If our walking and handwriting tend to be distinctive and recognizable and usually stable over time, why shouldn't that also be true of the kind of voice we use in our writing?

Of course if we seldom walk, and always with conscious effort, we probably don't develop a recognizable, distinctive walking style. Early toddlers haven't yet "found their own walk." So it is natural that inexperienced writers often have no characteristic style or "signature" to their writing. Helen Vendler (1982) says of Sylvia Plath that she "had early mastered certain course sound effects," but in her later poetry, "she has given up on a bald imitation of Thomas and has found her own voice" (131).

But it's worth questioning the *mystique* that sometimes surrounds the idea of "finding one's voice"—questioning the assumption that it is necessarily better to have a recognizable, distinctive voice in one's writing. Surely it doesn't make a writer *better* to

have a distinctive style. It is just as admirable to achieve Keats's ideal of "negative capability": the ability to be a protean, chameleon-like writer. If we have become so practiced that our skills are automatic and habitual—and thus characteristic—we are probably pretty good, whether as walker or writer. But a really skilled or professional walker or writer will be able to bring in craft, art, and play so as to deploy different styles at will, and thus not have a recognizable, distinctive voice. Don't we tend to see Yeats as more impressive than Frost (not necessarily better)—Brahms than Elgar—for the ability to use a greater variety of voices?

Notice how I am still not breaching any of the sticky theoretical problems of self or identity that haunt arguments about voice in writing. If I have a "distinctive and recognizable voice," that voice doesn't necessarily *resemble* me or feel to me like "mine" or imply that there is a "real me." Recognizable or distinctive voice is not about "real identity." We may *recognize* someone from their handwriting or their walk, but those behaviors are not necessarily pictures of what they are like. For example, we might find ourselves saying, "He has such a distinctively casual, 'laid-back' way of walking, yet his personality or character is very uptight."

So if we strip away any unwarranted mystique from the term "recognizable, distinctive voice in writing," it has a simple and practical use. We can ask about any author whether he or she tends to have a characteristic style or recognizable voice; and if so, whether a particular text displays that style or voice—whether it is characteristic or different from how that author usually writes. And we can ask our students to develop comfortable fluency and to notice if and where they seem to develop a distinctive style—and whether that style seems to be helpful for them. I tend to discourage students from lusting after a "distinctive voice," since that so often leads to pretension and overwriting.

So look again at our example from D. H. Lawrence: it may not be a picture of the "real" Lawrence (if there is such a thing) but it *is* vintage Lawrence criticism—not just a nonce style or voice he used in this essay.

(4) *Voice with Authority—"Having a Voice"*

This is the sense of voice that is current in much feminist work (see, for example, Julier and Carlton in this volume and *Women's Ways of Knowing* by Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule). But the sense is venerable too. Indeed the phrase "having a voice" has traditionally meant having the authority to speak or wield influence or to vote in a group. ("Does she have a voice in the faculty senate?" or "in the President's kitchen cabinet?")

As readers we often have no trouble agreeing about whether a text shows a writer having or taking the authority to speak out: whether the writer displays the conviction or the self-trust or gumption to make her voice heard. As teachers, we frequently notice and applaud the difference when we see a student who is a timid writer finally speak out with some conviction and give her words some authority. We often notice the same issue in *our* own writing or that of our colleagues when we are asked to give feedback. One of the traditional problems when we revise dissertations for publication is getting rid of the deferential, questioning, permission-asking tone—getting more authority into the voice. It would be an interesting research project to understand better what textual features give readers a sense of authority.

Notice that this sense of voice, like all the previous ones, does not entail any theory of identity or self, nor does it require making any inferences about the actual writer from the words on the page. When we see this kind of authority in writing, or the lack of it, we are not necessarily getting a good picture of the actual writer. It's not unusual, for example, for someone to develop a voice with strong authority that doesn't match their sense or our sense of who they are. Indeed, one of the best ways to find authority or achieve assertiveness of

voice is to role-play and write in the voice of some "invented character" who is strikingly different from ourselves. We see this in simple role-playing exercises where the timid person "gets into" strong speech. And we see it in the complex case of Swift. He exerted enormous authority in the person of Gulliver and all his other ironic personae, and never published anything under his own name. (Ironically, he wielded excoriating judgmental authority through personae that were nonjudgmental and self-effacing.)

Let's look at our examples again. Clearly D. H. Lawrence had no trouble using a voice with authority and making it heard in print. Some feel he overdid it. R. S. Crane uses a quieter voice but achieves a magisterial authority nevertheless. An authoritative voice in writing need not be loud; it often has a quality of quiet, centered calm. We see this in speech too: schoolchildren often talk about "shouters"—teachers who shout a lot because they lack authority.

As teachers, most of us say we want our students to develop some authority of voice, and we applaud when the timid student speaks out. However, many of our practices as teachers have the effect of making students more timid and hesitant in their writing. In the following passage Virginia Woolf (see Payne 1983) writes about voice as authority—that is, about the struggle to take on authority in a situation where she was expected to be deferential:

Directly ... I took my pen in my hand to review that novel by a famous young man, she slipped behind me and whispered, "My dear, you a young woman. You are writing about a book that has been written by a man. Be sympathetic; be tender; flatter deceive use all the arts and wiles of our sex. Never let anybody guess that you have a mind of your own..." And she made as if to guide my pen... [But in doing so] she would have plucked the heart out of my writing. (Payne 1983, 83)

We may write elegantly and successfully, she implies, but if we don't write with authority, with a mind of our own that is willing to offend, what we produce scarcely counts as real writing (*the heart is plucked out of it*).

(5) *Resonant Voice or Presence*

Here at last is trouble—the swamp. This is the angle of meaning that has made voice such a disputed term—the arena of "authenticity," "presence," sincerity, identity, self, and what I called "real voice" in *Writing with Power* (1981). Before wading in, let me pause to emphasize what I have gained by holding back so long—carefully separating what is solid from what is swampy. For my main argument in this essay is that there is little ground to dispute voice as a solid critical term—a term that points to certain definite and important qualities in texts that cannot easily be gainsaid: audible voice, dramatic voice recognizable or distinctive voice, and voice with authority. That is, even if we are completely at odds about the nature of selves or the ideology of identity, about whether people even have such things as selves, and about the relation of a text to the person who wrote it, we have a good chance of reaching agreement about whether any given text has audible voice, what kind of dramatic voice it has, whether it has a recognizable or distinctive voice, and whether the writer was able to achieve authority of voice. Similarly, even if teachers disagree completely about the nature of self and identity and about the value of sincerity in writing, they can probably agree that students would benefit from exploring and attending to these four dimensions of voice in their writing. With these meanings secure, *I* feel more authority to enter the arena of difficulty and conflict.

Indeed, I can begin my account of resonant voice by showing that the ground is not as swampy as we might fear. That is, the concept of resonant voice or presence is certainly arguable, and it involves making inferences about the relation between the present text and

the absent actual writer; it does *not* assume any particular model of the self or theory of identity—and in particular it does not require a model of the self as simple, single, unique, or unchanging. I can make this point by describing resonant voice in contrast to *sincere voice* (something that enthusiasts of voice have sometimes mistakenly celebrated).

We hear sincere voices all around us. Lovers say, "I only have eyes for you"; parents say, "Trust me"; teachers say, "I am on your side." Even salesmen and politicians are sometimes perfectly sincere. Surely Reagan was sincere much of the time. But sometimes those sincere words, *even in their very sincerity*, ring hollow. Genuine sincerity can itself feel cloyingly false. Yet we mustn't flip all the way over to the cynical position of people who have been burned too often and say that sincerity itself is false ("never trust a guy who really thinks he loves you"), or to the sophisticated position of some literary folk ("sincere art is bad art"). *Sometimes* we can trust sincere words. Sincere discourse is not always tinny.

What is a sincere voice? When we say that someone speaks or writes sincerely, we mean that they "really really believe" what they are saying. This means that they experience no gap at all between utterance and intention. In short, sincerity tells us about the fit between intention and conscious thought and feeling. But only that only about what the relation between what people intend to say and what they are consciously thinking and feeling. What about gaps between utterance and *unconscious* intentions and feelings?

Resonant voice is a useful concept because it points to the relationship between discourse and the unconscious. When we hear sincerity that is obviously tinny, we are hearing a *gap* between utterance and unconscious intention or feeling. Self-deception. Sensitive listeners can hear very small gaps. Thus they are also likely to be sensitive to the resonance that occurs when discourse *does* fit larger portions of the speaker—those precious moments in life and writing when a person actually does harness words to fit more of a person than conscious intention—those words which seem (in Adrienne Rich's words) to "have the heft of our living behind them."

Such words are of course rare. For a discourse can never *fully* express or articulate a whole person. A person is usually too complex and has too many facets, parts, roles, voices, identities. But at certain lucky or achieved moments, writers or speakers *do* manage to find words which seem to capture the rich complexity of the unconscious; or words which, though they don't *express* or *articulate* everything that is in the unconscious, nevertheless somehow seem to *resonate with* or *have behind them* the unconscious as well as the conscious (or at least much larger portions than usual). It is words of this sort that we experience as resonant—and through them we have a sense of presence with the writer.

Notice now how the concept of resonant voice opens the door to irony, fiction, lying, and games; indeed it positively *calls for* these and other polyvocal or multivalent kinds of discourse. If we value the sound of resonance—the sound of more of a person behind the words—and if we get pleasure from a sense of the writer's presence in a text, we are often going to be drawn to what is ambivalent and complex and not just to earnest attempts to tell the sincere truth. Can two million New Critics be completely wrong in their obsessive praise of irony? The most resonant language is often lying and gamey. Writing with resonant voice needn't be unified or coherent; it can be ironic, unaware, disjointed.

Any notion of resonant voice would have to include Swift's strongest works; even Pope's "Rape of the Lock" where he makes fun of the silliness and vanity he also loves. When Lawrence says of Melville, "The artist was so much greater than the man," he is talking about the difference between Melville's sincere sentiments and those parts of his writing that express his larger darker vision—writing that resonates with more parts of himself or his vision or his feelings than he was consciously aware of. In effect, Lawrence is saying that Melville "the man" has plenty of audible, dramatic, distinctive, and authoritative, voice ("And that's Melville. Oh dear when the solemn ass brays! brays!

brays!"). But he lacks resonant voice ("But there's something false")—except where he functions "as artist" and renders more of his unconscious knowledge and awareness. It's no accident that the resonance shows up most in his discourse "as artist": that is, we tend to get more of our unconscious into our discourse when we use metaphors and tell stories and exploit the sounds and rhythms of language.

Once we see that resonance comes from getting more of ourselves behind the words, we realize that unity or singleness is not the goal. Of course we don't have simple, neatly coherent or unchanging selves. To remember the role of the unconscious is to remember what Bakhtin and social constructionists and others say in different terms: we are made of different roles, voices. Indeed, Barbara Johnson sees a link between voice and *splitness* or *doubleness* itself—words which render multiplicity of self: "The sign of an authentic voice is thus not self-identity but self-difference."

Keith Hjortshoj (exploring relations between writing and physical movement) insists that cohesion is not always the goal—with writing or with selves:

Cohesion, then, isn't always a cardinal virtue, in [physical] movement or writing... To appreciate fully the freedom, flexibility, and speed with which young children adapt to their surroundings, we have to remember that they continually come unglued and reassemble themselves—usually several times a day. They have wild, irrational expectations of themselves and others. They take uncalculated risks that lead them to frustration, anger, and fear in the space of a few minutes they pass from utter despair to unmitigated joy, and sometimes back again, like your average manic-depressive. (12)

Selves tend to evolve, change, take on new voices and assimilate them. The concept of resonant voice explains the intriguing power of so much speech and writing by children: they wear their unconscious more on their sleeve; their defenses are often less elaborate. Thus they often get more of themselves into or behind their discourse.

One reason writing is particularly important (as opposed to speech)—and why writing provides a site for resonant voice or presence—is that writing, particularly with its possibilities for privacy, has always served as a crucial place for trying out parts of the self or unconscious that have been hidden or neglected or undeveloped—to experiment and try out "new subject positions." (See Jonsberg 1993.)

When we have gotten to know a student somewhat through her writing, or when we are reading a sufficiently long manuscript, we can sometimes notice particular places where the writer seems to get in a bit more of what we sense is her self or sensibility. Often these are little changes of tone or eruptions or asides or digressions—even lapses of a sort: but they are places where suddenly we feel an added infusion of weight, richness, presence. Some important dimension of perception or thinking or feeling formerly kept out of the writing is now allowed in—and when we hear this element, we hear a kind of added correlation with the complex entity we infer as writer. I experience these passages as pieces of added resonance or presence. Often they complicate things; they may even be places where the writing breaks down. That is—except for exceptional writing — resonant voice often correlates with places where a text has a hole or crack or disjuncture. When I notice bits of resonance in others' writing—or when others notice it in mine—it is often a cue that the piece is going to have to get worse before it gets better—be reshaped or restanced or revoiced in some way—or at least before it can realize the potential resonance that is trying to get in.

When we see that the central question then for this kind of power in writing is not "How sincere are you?" but "How much of yourself did you manage to get *behind* the words?" we see why voice has been such a tempting metaphor. That is, the physical voice is more resonant when it can get more of the body resonating behind it or

underneath it. "Resonant" seems a more helpful word than "authentic," and it is more to the point than "sincerity," because it connotes the "resounding" or "sounding-again" that is involved when distinct parts can echo each other (thus Coleridge's figure of the aeolian lyre). Just as a resonant physical voice is not in any way a *picture* of the body, but it has the body's resources behind or underneath it, so too resonant voice in writing is not a picture of the self, but it has the self's resources behind or underneath it. The metaphor of "voice" inevitably suggests a link with the body and "weight," and this is a link that many writers call attention to. After all, the body often shows more of ourselves than the conscious mind does: our movements, our stance, our facial expressions often reveal our dividedness, complexity, and splitness.

Here is a striking passage where William Carlos Williams (1936) sounds this theme of a link between writing, voice, and the body:

So poets...are in touch with "voices," but this is the very essence of their power, the voices are the past, the depths of our very beings. It is the deeper...portions of the personality speaking, the middle brain, the nerves, the glands, the very muscles and bones of the body itself speaking.

Roland Barthes (1977) is particularly intriguing in this vein. Notice, how he celebrates "the grain of the voice" by distinguishing it from the "dramatic expressivity" of opera—in effect, from sincerity:

Listen to a Russian bass (a church bass—opera [in contrast] is a genre in which the voice has gone over in its entirety to dramatic expressivity...): something is there, manifest and stubborn, (one hears only *that*), beyond (or before) the meaning of the words, their form...the melisma, and even the style of execution: something which is directly in the cantor's body, brought to your ears in one and the same movement from deep down in the cavities, the muscles, the membranes, the cartilages, and from deep down in the Slavonic language, as though a single skin lined the inner flesh of the performer and the music he sings. The voice is not *personal*: it *expresses nothing of the cantor and his soul* [emphasis added]; it is not original...and at the same time it is individual: it has us hear a body which has no civil identity, no "personality," but which is nevertheless a separate body...The "grain" is that: the materiality of the body speaking its mother tongue. (181)

See Adrienne Rich's figure of language with "the sheer heft" or weight "of our living behind it."³

Of course I'm not saying that writing with resonant voice *must* be ironic, gamey, split—cannot be sincere or personal. The Rich poem is surely sincere and personal. Nor that the self does not characteristically have a kind of coherence and even persistence of identity over time. I'm just insisting that the notion of resonant voice or presence in writing does not require these things.

Examples of resonant voice? I would venture to call the Adrienne Rich poem an example (see end note 3). But examples are not easy to cite because we cannot point to identifiable features of language that are "resonant"—as we can point to features that are audible, dramatic, distinctive, or authoritative. Rather, we are in the dicey business of pointing to the *relation* of textual features to an inferred person present behind the text. Of course this inferred presence can only come from other features of the text. It's as though—putting it bluntly or schematically—any sentence, paragraph, or page can be resonant or not, depending on the context of a longer work or oeuvre.

Look, for example, at our passages from Lawrence and Crane. I hear so *much* voice in the Lawrence: audible, dramatic, distinctive, authoritative. With that much vividness and noise, I can't decide whether I hear resonance. The passage is gamey, tricky, show-offy—a pose. But of course that doesn't disqualify it either. I'm not sure; I'd have to read more.

Crane? Again we cannot decide from such a short passage. Certainly it is not rich in the kind of audible and dramatic voice that Robert Frost asked for (the "speaking tone of voice somehow entangled in the words and fastened to the page for the ear of the imagination"). But that's not the point with resonant voice. If we read more we might indeed hear behind this somewhat forbidding prose the "sheer heft of his living," and experience a powerful resonance or presence in the passage.

For of course assertions about resonant voice will always be more arguable than about other kinds of voice. Not only because we are dealing with subtle inferences rather than pointing to particular linguistic features, but also because our main organ for listening to resonance is our own self. That is, we are most likely to hear resonance when the words resonate with *us*, fit *us*. This is an obvious problem, and it is enough to make some people insist that the only resonance we can talk about is between the text and the reader, not the text and the writer. (Bakhtin uses a metaphor of *literal* resonance between speaker and listener when he says we lose intonation in our speech unless we have "choral support" from sympathetic or like-minded listeners [1976, 102-6].)

I agree that when we hear resonance, we are *most often* hearing a resonance of the words with our own predilections, tastes, obsessions. But something more than this is happening, surely, when readers of many different temperaments hear resonance in the same piece of writing—even a very idiosyncratic piece. And most of us have occasionally had a teacher or editor who is peculiarly good because she possesses the ability to "hear around" her own temperament and predilections—to hear resonance even when it doesn't fit her. This is the ability to love and feel great power in a piece while still being able to say, "But this is not my kind of writing—it doesn't really fit me"—and still help the writer revise her piece in a direction different from one's own predilections or taste. To put it another way, this kind of reader is more expert at listening for resonance even when it involves what is "other" or "different" from herself.

The Problem of the Relationship between Discourse and the Actual Author

The concept of resonant voice or presence may not assume any ideology of self or identity, but it does assume something else controversial: that we can make inferences about the fit between the voice in a text and the actual unknown, unseen historical writer behind the text—on the basis of the written text alone. We can have audible, dramatic, distinctive, and authoritative voice without any sense of whether the voice fits or doesn't fit the real author. Not so here with resonant voice or presence.

Although it may seem peculiar to say that we can sense the fit between the voice in a text and the unknown writer behind it (especially in the light of much poststructural literary theory), in truth people have an ingrained habit of doing just that: listening not *only to* each other's words but also listening *for* the relationship between the words and the speaker behind the words. To put this in a nonstartling way, we habitually listen to see whether we can trust the speaker. If we know the speaker these judgments are natural and unproblematic. ("Alice, your words make a lot of sense, but they just don't sound like you.")

But we sometimes make the same judgments with the discourse of people we *don't* know. When we hear an announcer or public speaker or we begin to converse with a stranger, we sometimes conclude that they sound unbelievable or fake, even when *what*

they say is sensible and believable in itself. Something is fishy about the voice and we feel we don't trust this person. Sometimes the speaker sounds evasive, halting, awkward. But as often as not, on the contrary, we are bothered because the speaker seems too glib or fluent—as in the case of certain overzealous salesmen or politicians. Sometimes the speaker sounds insincere, but sometimes something sounds "off" even when the person sounds sincere.

Perhaps we are relying on visual cues from the speaker before our eyes. Yet we go on making these judgments without visual cues—when strangers speak over the telephone or on the radio: nothing but literal voice to go on. Sometimes we still conclude that there is something untrustworthy about the voice of some politician or radio announcer or salesman. It's not that we necessarily distrust the message; sometimes we believe it. But we distrust the speaker—or at least we distrust the fit between the message and the speaker. How do we make these judgments about whether to trust someone when all we have is their language? Doubtless we go on auditory cues of intonation and rhythm: literal "tone of voice."

But tone of voice is nothing but a "way of talking," and when we only have *writing by a stranger*, we still have a "way of talking" to go on—that is, his or her way of writing. Even though we can't see or hear the writer, and even though writing provides fewer semiotic channels for nuance, we still draw inferences from the writer's syntax, diction, structure, strategies, stance, and so forth.

Obviously, these inferences are risky. But my point is that we've all had lots of training in making them. Repeatedly in our lives we face situations where our main criterion for deciding *whether* an utterance is true is whether to trust the speaker. When we take our car to a mechanic, most of us don't base our decision about whether the carburetor needs replacing on data about carburetors but rather on a decision about trustworthiness of voice. We often do the same thing when we take our body to a doctor—or decide to trust *anyone* about a matter we don't understand. We mustn't forget how practiced and skilled most of us have become at this delicate kind of judgment just because we remember so vividly the times we judged wrong. And we know that some people are strikingly good at figuring out whether someone can be trusted. They must be reading something. The practice of counseling and therapy depends on this kind of ear. Skilled listeners can sometimes even hear *through* sincerity: they can hear that even though the speaker is perfectly sincere, he cannot be trusted. There must be real cues in discourse—readable but subtle—about the relationship between discourse and speaker. Because we are listening for relationships between what is explicitly in the text and cues about the writer that are implicit in the text, we can seldom make these kinds of judgments unless we have extended texts—better yet two or three texts by the same writer.

Because our inferences about voice are so subtle, they are seldom based on conscious deliberation: we usually make these inferences with the *ear*—by means of how the discourse "sounds" or "feels" or whether it "rings true." We use the kind of tacit, nonfocal awareness that Polanyi addresses and analyzes so well, such as when we see a faint star better by not looking directly at it.

Notice that this peculiar skill—evaluating the trustworthiness or validity of utterances by how things are said because we cannot evaluate what is said—often does not correlate with "school learning." Schools naturally emphasize texts, and when we are learning skills with texts (and especially when our culture becomes more text-oriented or literate in the ways described by Olson and Ong and so many others) we are learning how to pay more attention to the relationship between words and their meanings and referents—and less attention to the relationship between words and their speakers or writers.

In a way, we've stumbled upon the very essence of schooling or literacy training: learning to attend better to the meaning and logic of words themselves and to stop relying

on extratextual cues such as how impressive or authoritative the author is or how you feel about her. School and the culture of literacy advise us to this effect: "Stop listening for the tone of voice and interpreting gestures. These are the tricks of illiterates and animals—evaluating speech on the basis of what they think of the speaker because they can't read or judge the message for itself." Sometimes the successful student or scholar is the *least* adept at this kind of metatextual reading—at what we call "street smarts." Good teachers learn to integrate street smarts with literacy training, whether in first grade or college, for the sake of helping students be more sophisticated with purely silent textual language—instead of letting students feel that their skill at reading the person behind the text is a hindrance in school. (This is the message in Deborah Brandt's insightful *Literacy as Involvement* [1990].)

I'm really making a simple claim here—and it's the same claim that I made earlier about audible and dramatic voice that our primary and formative experiences with language were with words emerging audibly from physically present bodies—and most of us continue to encounter this kind of language as much as encounter silent texts, if not more. For this reason, we can scarcely prevent ourselves from hearing the presence of human beings in language and attending to the relationship between the language and the person who speaks or writes it. Conditioning alone nudges us to do so, but more important, much of our functioning in the world depends on this skill. Many school practices blunt this skill—allegedly for the sake of literacy training, but Brandt argues intriguingly that these practices are based on a mistaken model of literacy.

If we explore Aristotle and the process of persuasion for a moment, we can find more corroboration for the nonstartling claim that humans naturally listen to discourse for cues about the actual person behind it. Aristotle (see Roberts 1954) defines *ethos* as a potent source of persuasion, but scholars argue about what he meant by the term.

Sometimes he emphasizes the author's real character, talking about "the personal character of the speaker," and saying "We believe good men more fully and more readily than others" (*Rhetoric* 1356a). But sometimes he emphasizes how speakers can fool listeners and persuade them with just dramatic voice or implied author. He talks about the ability to "make ourselves *thought to be* sensible and morally good..." (1378a; my emphasis). And he notes that this is a matter of skill, not character:

We can now see that a writer must disguise his art and give the impression of speaking naturally and not artificially. Naturalness is persuasive, artificiality is the contrary; for our hearers are prejudiced and think we have some design against them...(1404b)

Scholars fight about this ambiguity in the *Rhetoric*, but the fight would disappear if they simply noticed and accepted the fact that he is affirming both positions in what is in fact the common sense view: in effect, "It's nice to *be* trustworthy; but if you're skilled you can fake it."

When Aristotle says that we can persuade people by creating a dramatic voice that is more trustworthy than we actually are—by saying, in effect, that a good rhetor can sometimes fool the audience—he is talking about the gap between implied author and real author, between dramatic voice and the writer's own voice. Because he's writing a handbook for authors, he's telling them how they can hide this gap if they are skilled. They can *seem* more trustworthy than they are, but to do so they must fool the audience into not seeing the gap. If he'd been writing a handbook for *audiences* rather than authors (writing "reception theory" instead of "transmission theory"), he would have looked at this gap from the other side. He would have emphasized how skilled listeners can uncover the gap that speakers are trying to hide. He would have talked about how skilled listeners can detect

differences between the implied author and the real author—can detect, that is, dishonesty or untrustworthiness even through a sensible message or a fluent delivery. In short, by arguing in the *Rhetoric* that skilled speakers can seem better than they are, he is acknowledging that there is a gap to be detected, and implying that good listeners can make inferences about the character of the speaker from their words.

Since readers and listeners make these perceptions all the time about the trustworthiness of the speaker or writer on the basis of their words alone, any valid rhetorical theory must show that persuasiveness often comes from *resonant voice or communicated presence* as often as it comes from merely dramatic voice or implied author. Aristotle clearly implies what common sense tells us: we are not persuaded by implied author as such—that is, by the creation of a dramatic voice that sounds trustworthy; we are only persuaded if we believe that dramatic voice is the voice of the actual speaker or author. We don't buy a used car from someone just because we admire their dramatic skill in creating a fictional trustworthy voice. If *ethos* is nothing *but* implied author, it loses all power of persuasion.⁴

Identity Politics, the Nature of Self, "Is There a Real Me?" The Crunch Comes When We Have to Write or Teach Writing

So far, I have claimed that none of these senses of voice imply or require any particular theory of identity or self. We can take whatever ideological position we want and still use the term *voice* clearly and usefully. Even resonant voice accommodates the ideology of choice. Can I claim, then, that the identity issue *never* comes up? No. For I've so far emphasized the process of *reading*—the process of describing voice in texts produced by others. Once we set out to write, however, or to teach writing, it is hard to escape the identity issue.

For there is a momentous asymmetry between the position of reader and writer. As readers we have access only to the text, not to the writer; but as writers we have access *both* to the text and to ourselves. We hear the sound of our text and we usually hear whether it sounds like "us." (If won't define "us" because there's no need to: most of us don't define "us"—we simply have intuitive sense of when our speech or writing sounds as though it is coming from us or not. Perhaps "us" is the sound of or most comfortable or characteristic inner and outer speech. Who knows? But we don't have to understand that issue here.) So we are apt to notice it if we sense that our writing (our textual voice) doesn't seem to sound like us—feels somehow artificial or pretended or distanced or stilted. Of course most of us have more than one voice that feels like us: we may feel just as natural and like ourselves in talking tough slang talk with a sports team, intimate casual talk with family, and fairly formal talk at colloquia. But just because we have multiple voices that sound natural or like ourselves doesn't mean that we always feel that way. Most of us sometimes also experience our spoken or written voice as not quite fitting us or natural.

It's true that there are certain conditions where we don't notice whether our textual voice feels like ours: if we have been somehow trained not to pay attention to the sound of our textual voice at all; or somehow trained not to notice the sound of "us"—our characteristic ways of producing inner and outer speech; or if we have a sense of "us" that is completely fluid and without boundaries. And so I can hold off all identity issues try, to write with audible voice, distinctive voice, authoritative voice; I can try to use the dramatic voice or persona that seems most appropriate for my audience; I can try to use a voice that "situates itself within the conversation" I seek to join—trying to take on the voices that make up that conversation; (this is what Don Bialostosky, drawing on Bakhtin [1981], calls "well-situated voice," and it is surely one of the main ways in which I can give my voice

authority). I can do all those things and still never ask or experience whether the words feel like mine.

But surely this is fairly rare. Thus for many people (not just those women interviewed by Gilligan or by Belenky and her colleagues) the question is not just whether one has a strong or distinctive voice but whether that voice feels like "one's own." For of course it's not uncommon for people to develop a voice that is strong or lively or distinctive or authoritative, but which feels somehow alien—and to feel like using it means remaining without power or authority. Here a passage from an interview with a woman talking about this experience:

Writing has always been so hard and I've always felt trapped inside myself in terms of having to put stuff on paper, um. So that ultimately when I did have to write stuff like reports, I managed to get somebody inside me to do them, but it wasn't like it was me doing it. And that's continued as an adult.... And I think I have sort of grown up and been an adult for a long time, thinking of myself as not having any voice... [But I] started thinking of all my work with children and how my voice in that work [she is a teacher] and that it's, you know, it's not a loud voice that says, but it's, you know, it's more like a voice like the wind or something [pause] that's there... [About an important report:] it was still as though, you know, I had finally set a deadline and I got the person inside me who does that piece of writing when the deadline happens [to do it].... [And about another paper for a course:] I wanted to write it in my own voice and not make the ghost writer in me, or whoever that is, basically [do] it. (Tavalin 1994, 53–55)

When we write, then, most of us cannot help brushing against the identity issue and noticing whether our words feel like us or ours—and ideally we have a *choice* about whether to use prose that feels as though it fits us. (Of course plenty of people—both inexperienced and even professional writers—don't feel as though it's possible to let writing actually sound like themselves. They don't feel capable of just uttering themselves on paper—as extensive freewriting shows one how to do.) In making this choice we notice that there are two extreme ideological or theoretical positions here about language and self. At one extreme, the "sentimental" position says, "Hold fast to your 'you' at all costs. Don't give in and write in the voice 'they' want. Your voice is the only powerful voice to use. Your true voice will conquer all difficulties." At the other extreme, the "sophisticated" position says, "Your sense of 'you' is just an illusion of late Romantic, bourgeois capitalism. Forget it. You have no self. There is no such thing. You are nothing but roles. Write in the role that is appropriate for this situation."

But in practice we don't have to choose between such extreme positions. It is far more helpful to move somewhat back and forth between some version of them—especially with regard to practices. (The purely theoretical fight loses interest after a while.) We can come at our writing from both sides of the identity fence.

First the "sentimental" side. Suppose my characteristic voice—the voice that feels like me or mine—tends to be insecure or hesitant (or tied in knots or enraged). And I know all too well that this voice of mine has repeatedly undermined my writing. I don't have to slap my wrists and say, "I guess I've just got a bad, ineffective voice, and so I'll have to get a better one." I *can* use whatever voices feel most comfortable and most like me—particularly for exploratory writing, private writing, and early draft writing.

Then for the *short run* it turns out that it isn't so hard to revise late drafts from a pragmatic and audience-oriented frame of reference and make a limited number of

changes and get rid of most of the voice problems for readers. Get rid of the worst pieces of syntactic insecurity or hesitations (or convolutions or rages). When I do this, the underlying plasma of my prose still feels as though it is me is my own voice. As I indicated in my account of resonant voice, I think good readers feel something lacking or some lack of resonance when people don't use their own plasma.

And, perhaps more important, in the *long run*, when I use the voice or voices that I experience as mine—such as they are and with all their limitations—use them a lot for exploratory and private and early draft writing and try them out on myself and others—listening to them and in appreciating them—these voices tend to get richer and develop. For example, an insecure voice tends to become more confident. Gradually I find I have more flexibility of voice—more voices that feel like me.

But I can also work from the "sophisticated" side of this identity issue. I can think of all discourse as the taking on of roles or as the use of the voices of others. I can take on the mentality that Auden celebrated in his wonderful poem, "The Truest Poetry Is the Most Feigning," and consciously practice role-playing and ventriloquism and heteroglossia. Role-playing and irony and make-believe often get at possible or temporary selves or dimensions of the protean self that are important and useful but unavailable to conscious thinking and feeling. To take a concrete example, people who are characteristically timid, quiet, self-effacing—who have a hard time getting heard or getting any force into language—often come up with a powerfully angry voice when they let themselves play that role. It's as though they have an angry voice in their unconscious. (I'm not sure whether the sophisticated position admits of an unconscious.) When this angry voice gets a hold of the pen, the resulting language is often very powerful indeed—though hard to control. At first this voice feels alien, but gradually one often comes to own or claim it more.

Notice that in both approaches, both sentimental and the sophisticated, we see the same crucial process: gradual development and enrichment of voice. In one case it is matter of using, trusting, and "playing in" (as with an unplayed violin) a voice that feels like one's own—and seeing it become more flexible. In the other case it is a matter of trusting oneself to use unaccustomed or even alien voices in a spirit of play and non-investment—and seeing those voices become more comfortable and owned.

Bakhtin (1981) provides us with a good example of someone trying to do justice to both positions. All the while he is arguing that our words always come from the mouths and voices of others, he never stops being interested in the process by which we take these alien words and I, make them our own."

The importance of struggling with another's discourse, its influence in the history of an individual's coming to dialogical consciousness, is enormous. One's own discourse and one's own voice although born of another or dynamically stimulated by another, will sooner or later begin to liberate themselves from the authority of the other's discourse. (348. See 343 *ff* on this issue.)⁵

Concluding

When it comes to our own writing, then, we can scarcely avoid noticing whether the words we put down on the page feel like our words—whether they sound like our voice or one of our owned voices. Yet even here, I hope I've persuaded you that we write best if we learn to move flexibly back and forth between on the one hand using and celebrating something we feel as our *own* voice, and on the other hand operating as though we are nothing but ventriloquists playfully using and adapting and working against an array of voices we find around us.

And for my larger argument, I hope I've made it clear why voice should be such a tempting metaphor for this family of related dimension of texts that are so important and often neglected. It's also clear why voice is a lightning rod for ideological dispute, but I hope I've provided the kind of analysis needed to make voice a practical critical tool that we can *use* rather than just fight about. For it mostly doesn't even matter what we believe about the nature of self or about the relation of a text to the actual writer.

I think we need to make the kinds of distinctions I have spelled out between the family of five meanings for voice in writing. But once we have had our critical conversation about voice in writing so as to make the concept more solidly understood and widely acknowledged, I don't think we'll always have to be so fussy about distinctions. We'll be able to say to a friend or student, "I hear more voice in these passages; something rich and useful and interesting is going on there; can you get more of that?" and not necessarily have to make careful distinctions between audible, dramatic, recognizable, authoritative, and resonant voice. There are crucial differences between the various kinds of voice in writing—but more often than not they go together. And surely the richly bundled connotations of the human voice are what hold them all together.

Notes

Here are a couple of important points to keep in mind in such research. Idiomatic speech qualities are not the only source of audibility in a text. Certain rhythmic, rhetorical, or poetic features also increase audibility even though they are uncharacteristic of how people actually talk. Thus we are likely to hear audible voice in the following passage even though we don't hear people talk this way:

Because these men work with animals, not machines or numbers, because they live outside in landscapes of torrential beauty, because they are confined to a place and a routine embellished with awesome variables, because calves die in the arms that pulled others into life, because they go to the mountains as if on a pilgrimage to find out what makes a herd of elk tick, their strength is also a softness, their toughness, a rare delicacy. (Ehrlich 1985, 52–53)

Also, as Crismore points out in an interesting study, passages of “metadiscourse” in writing tend to be heard as more voiced (e.g., "Let me now turn to my second point"). But I think her insight is really part of a larger point: it's not just metadiscourse that creates audibility, but rather the signaling of any *speech-act*. "I disagree" is not metadiscourse, but as with any speech act, it highlights the presence and agency of a writer. See Elbow 1989. See the work of Palacas, described in end note 2, for other important syntactic features that heighten audibility.

2. Palacas (1989) provides an extremely interesting analysis—one of the best per seen—of syntactical or grammatical features that give readers a heightened sense of the writer's voice or presence. He's pointing to what he calls "parentheticals" such as my insertion above of "—one of the best I've seen—." These insertions or reflections bring into a text the sound of the author commenting on, reflecting on, or in a sense editing, his own assertions, and they heighten and complicate the intonational pattern of the text. They also make the text seem an enactment-of-thinking-going-on rather than a record-of-completed-thinking. (The fact that these features also increase audibility in a text shows that the different kinds of voice that I am working so hard to distinguish often blend into each other.)

3. It is worth citing the whole poem—not only as a definition of resonant voice but also, I'd say, as an instance:

Poetry: III*

Even if we knew the children were all asleep
and healthy the ledgers balanced the water running clear in the pipes
and all the prisoners free

Even if every word we wrote by then
were honest the sheer heft
of our living behind it
not these sometimes
lax indolent lines
these litanies

Even if we were told not just by friends
that this was honest work

Even if each of us didn't wear
a brass, locket with a picture
of a strangled woman a girlchild sewn through the crotch

Even if someone had told us, young: *This is not a key*
nor a peacock feather
not a kite nor a telephone
This is the kitchen sink the grinding-stone

would we give ourselves
more calmly over feel less criminal joy when the thing comes as it does come
clarifying grammar
and the fixed and mutable stars—?

—Adrienne Rich (1984)

4. This is a perplexing business. We are sometimes tempted to ascribe great power to the dramatic voice alone when we see people *seeming* to be persuaded by blatantly fake or inauthentic voice—for example, in the realm of politics and advertising. “Look at all those people voting for someone who is so patently unbelievable. How can they be taken in?” But when people seem to be persuaded by glib dramatic voice, I think there are often dynamics of alienation, powerlessness, and cynicism at play. Those same people who vote for the speaker with glib dramatic voice often say things like, “Yeah, I can tell he is a crook. But what can you do?” It's not that they don't hear the gap between language and person. We need good research about what people actually hear and understand when they hear glib, untrustworthy dramatic voice.

*“Poetry III” is printed from *Your Native Land, Your Life*, by Adrienne Rich, by permission of the author and W. W. Norton & Company, Inc. Copyright ©1986 by Adrienne Rich.

5. William Coles (1988) and Walker Gibson (1966) provide two more examples of midway positions on the issue of voice and identity. They may not have intended to take a middle position, for in fact both of them repeatedly insist that they are not interested in the real writer at all, only in the textual voice; they insist that we create ourselves anew every time we speak or write. Yet the test they often use for language is not whether it is

strong in itself or well suited to the audience but rather a certain sense of authenticity. Here is Coles writing about the textual voice in a letter by Nicola Sacco (of Sacco and Vanzetti) that Coles uses in his teaching: "...for me there's no 'facade' here, not any more than Sacco is 'behind' anything. That language of his, so far as I'm concerned, he's in. He's it. And it's him" (179). When they criticize a textual voice, they often "fake"; Coles sometimes even calls it "bullshit." (If we create ourselves anew every time we speak or write, how can our creation ever be anything but real?) Here is Coles working both sides of the/identity street in two adjacent sentences where he is describing his process of "rewriting" himself in the process of revising his own book. In one sentence he says he is doing "no more than trying to solve a writing problem"; but in the next sentence he says his revising is "a way of seeing what it could mean to belong to one's self ..." (276). (Cole, and Gibson have some the best ears around for the subtleties and nuances of voice in a text—and this clearly derives from their work in Theodore Baird's famous English 1-2 course at Amherst College—in which Robert Frost also seemed to play a lurking role [see Varnum's forthcoming book and Harris's forthcoming article entitled "Voice"]. In the culture of that course we can see the same ambivalence about and identity: a insistence that voice is nothing but a phenomenon of text—yet a continual, intuitive listening for how textual voice reverberates in relation to a person behind the page. Gibson's *Tough, Sweet and Stuff* seems to me one of the best books around about voice and writing.)

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