

## *So to Speak*

JAMES LONGENBACH

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LET'S SAY you want to write a poem that by its fourth or fifth syllable sounds urgently spoken, a poem that makes its readers feel almost instantly engaged with an interlocutor, perhaps even making them feel late to the party—that the conversation is well underway. You might begin with an imperative that fills out a single pentameter line, the majority of its syllables ringing changes on a single vowel (*God, hold, tongue, love*) so that the line feels trippingly spontaneous and yet so tersely epigrammatic that it forestalls argument.

For Godsake hold your tongue, and let me love.

Or you might offer a charged exclamation, an even punchier string of monosyllables overriding the iambic rhythm, the majority of those syllables sharing no consonant with another (*he, starke, mad*) so that the mouth is forced to reshape itself with every syllable, the resulting utterance feeling deliberately considered.

He is starke mad.

Or you might ask a question, an aggressive enjambment dividing subject from predicate and throwing extra pressure on the syllable (the first person pronoun) with which the line both begins and ends, this elegantly balanced sonic decorum tempering the line's narcissism while also displaying it.

I wonder by my troth, what thou and I  
Did, till we loved?

No English-language poet is more thrillingly efficient than John Donne at establishing the immediate illusion of a speaking voice. Shakespeare's blank verse often generates the illusion as well, but it was Donne's achievement to have harnessed such dramatic energy

within the compass of the lyric poem, and one feels the lasting influence of Donne's strategies in the opening lines of poems by poets as different from one another as Robert Browning—

But do not let us quarrel any more.

—Marianne Moore—

Why so desolate?

—and D. H. Lawrence.

You tell me I am wrong.

These strategies continue to be crucial for poets writing today, poets as different from one another as Louise Glück—

Go ahead: say what you're thinking.

—John Ashbery—

Time, you old miscreant!

—and Frank Bidart.

I love sweets.

When we say that a poem's opening line presents us with a strong sense of voice, what we're often in fact saying is that the poem sounds like Donne. We're employing a metaphor, the *speaker* of the poem, which describes not how poems are destined to sound but how we've become accustomed to particular ways of organizing the medium of the English language into particular sonic patterns. Asking someone to write a sentence with a strong voice is like asking a chef to prepare a dish that tastes good. If she's successful, that chef will be thinking about particular ingredients along with the precise manner she will manipulate them; you can't reach into the pantry for a cup of voice.

It's nonetheless seductive to imagine ourselves as intimate listeners, rather than more distant readers; Socrates would have approved of this prejudice, which is as old as Western culture itself. But our impulse to employ the metaphor of a speaking voice has more recently

been conditioned by the lingering power of the New Criticism, the literary-critical movement that, while it flourished from the 1930s through the 1960s, encouraged several generations of readers to distinguish between the author and the speaker of a poem—often by foregrounding the example of Donne. “Every poem,” said Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren in the first edition of their influential anthology, *Understanding Poetry*, published in 1938, “implies a speaker of the poem.” In part, Brooks and Warren were providing readers with a way of coming to terms with the unfamiliar difficulties of certain modernist poems; it’s initially helpful to think of the disjunctive verbal texture of T. S. Eliot’s “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” as an utterance spoken by a particular person. But in later editions of *Understanding Poetry*, expediency hardens into method: “always when we are making acquaintance with a poem,” urged Brooks and Warren, “we must answer these questions: (1) Who is speaking? (2) Why?” These questions ask us to forget that the *speaker* of the poem is a metaphor; they ask us to define poems as utterances driven by the presence of a speaking subject (which poems may or may not seem to be), rather than strategic deployments of various kinds of syntax and diction (which poems always are).

The Eliot of “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” and *The Waste Land* was a poet who, like so many others, had learned from Donne how to establish the illusion of a speaking presence in just a few syllables.

Let us go then, you and I.

Here I am, an old man in a dry month.

My nerves are bad to-night. Yes, bad.

To borrow the influential language Eliot used to describe Donne’s poems, Eliot’s poems up to *The Waste Land* are poems of “psychology,” poems that dramatize states of mind “composed of odds and ends in constant flux and manipulated by desire and fear.”

Sentences like these helped to establish Donne’s central place in the New Criticism, but Eliot never set out merely to change taste; he set out to write the best poems he could muster, and as his own aesthetic

goals changed his relationship to Donne changed. In the years following the publication of *The Waste Land* in 1922, as Eliot accumulated the fragments he would eventually bring together to make *The Hollow Men* three years later, a different kind of poem began to emerge—a poem that does not encourage us to feel that it is spoken by a discrete human subject with a particular psychology. If the tone is still anguished, it is not self-dramatizing, as it is in “Prufrock”; the utterance feels oracular, dislocated, as if it were emerging not from within but from beyond human experience.

Here the stone images  
 Are raised, here they receive  
 The supplication of a dead man's hand  
 Under the twinkle of a fading star.

The author of these lines has no more use for Donne; he has even less use for the poet of “Prufrock.” While no poem is actually spoken on the page, these lines don't deploy Donne's strategies for creating the illusion of spokenness. They want to encourage us to pay attention not to the perceiving sensibility we might imagine behind the poem but to the world that exists independent of that sensibility.

Such suspicion of psychology, a suspicion not only of the narrow space of the mind but of the lyric's propensity to seduce us into the illusion of that space, is not in the twentieth century unique to the later Eliot. One feels it in poets of a certain strain of the American avant-garde, poets from Louis Zukofsky writing in response to the early Eliot to Susan Howe writing today; the variety of poets who became associated with the magazine *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* in the 1970s were more or less united by their desire to write poems that could not be imagined as being spoken, poems that could not be accounted for by New Critical methods of reading. While Eliot's swerve away from Donne was driven in part by the Christianity he embraced publicly in 1927, the rejection of the possibly pernicious illusion of the self-determining human subject was driven in these more recent poets by the conjunction of Marxism and post-structuralism.

These debates are now part of our literary past, not the present; Donne has survived them, just as he survived the censure of Pope and Johnson in the eighteenth century, when a preference for classical balance and poise made Donne's syntactical performances seem garish. But the value of these debates is that they don't allow us to take for granted the kind of work Donne accomplished; that is, we're made to consider the precise linguistic mechanisms through which the illusion of a poem's speaker is constructed, rather than assuming that poems always have speakers, the way people have tongues. How did Donne do it? How, after the shock of his opening lines, did he keep doing it for the duration of the whole poem?

It may seem that a sentence dominated by highly Latinate diction will tend to sound written, while a sentence dominated by Germanic monosyllables may tend to sound spoken—that hypotactic syntax will tend to sound written, while simpler syntactical constructions may sound spoken; but in fact a poem's sentences will feel increasingly dramatic to the degree that we're made to attend to the pattern of their syllables unfolding in time, and more precisely constituent of a poem's degree of spokenness than any particular kind of diction or syntax is the strategic interplay between different kinds of diction and syntax. Especially as this interplay is itself played out over a poem's lineation, the resulting utterance may feel extruded from the poem's emerging occasion, as if the voice or self we presume to be driving the utterance were not given but emergent.

The first stanza of "The Canonization" consists of one sentence, an imperative dominated by parataxis until its final line.

For Godsake hold your tongue, and let me love,  
     Or chide my palsie, or my gout,  
 My five gray hairs, or ruin'd fortune flout,  
     With wealth your state, your minde with arts improve,  
         Take you a course, get you a place,  
         Observe his honour, or his grace,  
 Or the King's real, or his stamped face  
     Contemplate, what you will, approve,  
     So you will let me love.

The sixty-seven words in this sentence are overwhelmingly monosyllabic; only eight of the words have more than one syllable, and while Latinate words abound (*state, arts, course, place, grace, real, face*), they are easily absorbed by the exclusively Germanic diction with which the sentence both begins (“For Godsake hold your tongue, and let me love”) and ends (“So you will let me love”). Syntactically, the final line’s turn to subordination (“So you will let me love”) is delayed by a long list of simple imperatives (*hold your tongue, let me love, chide my palsie, flout my fortune, improve your minde, take a course, get a place, observe his grace*). Formally, the meter and rhyme scheme puts pressure on this simple catalogue, the stanza moving from a quatrain rhymed *abba* to a more tightly rhymed tetrameter couplet (“Take you a course, get you a place,/Observe his honour, or his grace”) that quickens the act of listing and makes the entire sentence feel as if it were tumbling forward, bearing down on its final line with an inexhaustible reserve of exasperation.

But if this sentence establishes a pattern that asks to be experienced again, “The Canonization” surges forward impulsively, shifting its syntactical energies. In the second stanza, Donne follows the opening nine-line sentence with a string of one-line sentences, the imperative mode superseded by the interrogative.

Alas, alas, who’s injur’d by my love?  
 What merchant’s ships have my sighs drown’d?  
 Who says my teares have overflow’d this ground?  
 When did my colds a forward spring remove?

These characteristic shifts between sentences that alternately confirm or conflict with lineation, between sentences that shift abruptly from one mode or tense to another, highlight the illusion of spokenness by making us feel that the poem progresses by means of a succession of choices—as if the utterance were not premeditated but were happening in the time it takes to read it.

Donne’s lyrics are characteristically invested in argument (hence Donne’s frequent recourse to hypotaxis), but if the unpredictable and often counterintuitive conclusions of Donne’s poems feel inevitable, it is not simply because of the argument as such; it’s because we’re also

distracted from the argument by the sheer bravura of the syntactical performance. “The Canonization” begins by commanding the listener to stop talking (“hold your tongue”), but it concludes by transforming its listener into a speaker, who is enjoined to address the poem’s lovers in the second person.

And thus invoke us: “You whom reverend love  
 Made one another’s hermitage;  
 You, to whom love was peace, that now is rage,  
 Who did the whole world’s soul extract, and drove  
     Into the glasses of your eyes,  
     So made such mirrors, and such spies,  
 That they did all to you epitomize  
     Countries, Towns, Courts: beg from above  
 A pattern of your love!”

What has happened here? The sentence is an imperative, the listener addressing the poem’s speaker and the speaker’s lover (“you”), but the predicate is delayed by a sequence of parallel modifying clauses for so long (“whom reverend love/Made one another’s hermitage”—“who did the whole world’s soul extract”—“who drove/Into the glasses of your eyes. . . Countries, Towns, Courts”) that when the predicate finally appears (“beg”), it is so syntactically satisfying that the poem’s forever startling conclusion feels irrefutable: the poem’s haughty speaker has been humbled, enjoined to beg. This speaker is great, says “The Canonization,” but the listener, who in this final sentence becomes a participant in the poem’s unfolding action, has the last word. Who could have heard it coming?

This kind of conflict between what feel like different voices, explicit in “The Canonization,” is implicit in any poem that invites us to participate in the dramatized illusion of spokenness.

You tell me I am wrong.  
 Who are you, who is anybody to tell me I am wrong.  
 I am not wrong.

In Syracuse, rock left bare by the viciousness of Greek women,  
 No doubt you have forgotten the pomegranate trees in flower,  
 Oh so red, and such a lot of them.

The diction of these opening lines of D. H. Lawrence's "Pomegranate" is colloquial, the syntax untroubled by enjambment. But what matters most is that, like Donne, Lawrence enacts shifts in diction and syntax that make the poem feel produced spontaneously on the page. While the syntax of the confrontational first stanza features hypotactic syntax, as befits an argument ("who is anybody to tell me I am"), the syntax of the second stanza avoids subordination, its noun phrases hovering in placid reverie ("rock left bare"; "viciousness of Greek women"; "pomegranate trees in flower"). Then the violence of hypotaxis intrudes.

Do you mean to tell me you will see no fissure?  
Do you prefer to look on the plain side?

And then the reverie revives itself.

The end cracks open with the beginning:  
Rosy, tender, glittering within the fissure.

But not for long.

Do you mean to tell me there should be no fissure?  
No glittering, compact drops of dawn?  
Do you mean it is wrong, the gold-filmed skin, integument, shown  
ruptured?

It's almost tempting to say that, speaking metaphorically, "Pomegranate" is a dialogue between two voices, but what the poem's procedures more precisely suggest is that we're inclined to reach for the metaphor of voice not when we hear one consistent utterance but when we feel different kinds of diction, syntax, and lineation working against one another over time. "I prefer my heart to be broken./It is so lovely, dawn-kaleidoscopic within the crack," admits Lawrence in the poem's final stanza, reverie eclipsing the confrontational tone but also justifying its presence in a poem that is itself strategically broken, willfully at odds with itself.

Brokenness in no way implies a dearth of rigor or an acquiescence to chance, however.



another heavy frost what doesn't die or fly away  
 the groundhog for instance the bear is deep in sleep I'm thinking  
 a lot about sleep translation I'm not sleeping much  
 who used to be a champion of sleep  
 ex-champions are pathetic my inner parent says the world  
 is full of evil death cruelty degradation not sleeping  
 scores only 2 out of 10

but a moral sense

is exhausting I am exhausted a coma looks good to me  
 if only I could be sure there'd still be dreams it's what I miss the most  
 even in terrible dreams at least you feel what you feel not what  
 you're supposed to feel your house burns down so what  
 if you survived you rake the ashes sobbing

In contrast to Lawrence's "Pomegranate," in which most of the lines are end-stopped and syntactically complete, almost all the lines of Ellen Bryant Voigt's "Sleep" are enjambed, the lines refusing to allow us to process a completed syntactical phrase or clause without interruption. A clause may appear within a line ("the bear is deep in sleep"; "I am exhausted"), but the poem's eschewal of punctuation makes it difficult for us to rest within the completed clause. The formal pressure of line does not reinforce the structural work of syntax, as it might even without the assistance of punctuation—

But a moral sense is exhausting  
 I am exhausted  
 A coma looks good to me

—but instead forces us to experience the onslaught of syntax as more precisely what it is: a violent concatenation of multiple syntactical patterns carrying different tones and, as a result, fostering the illusion of a human being speaking from within the discovery of what she is driven to say.

The poem sounds like what we imagine spontaneity to be, but the relinquishment of punctuation no more contributes to freedom from structural and formal restraint than does the relinquishment of meter. The degree to which Voigt's poem sounds urgently spoken depends on the same procedures as Lawrence or Donne—

you tell me I am wrong who are you who is  
anybody to tell me I am wrong I am not wrong

—except that in “Sleep” the torquing energy of the syntactical shifts has become impossible to ignore.

What is the wish for a poem to have a voice a wish for? At best, it is a wish for visceral immediacy, a wish that poems by Donne, Lawrence, and Voigt repay handsomely. But at worst, it is a wish for the certainty of human presence, rather than the fluctuating work of language—a wish for reliable information rather than the infinitely repeatable pleasure of lyric knowledge. It’s of course useful to differentiate the biographical *author* from the fictional *speaker* of the poem, but one could as easily refer to the fictional *writer* of the poem, employing a word that points more readily to the concerted act of making than to the act of bodily inspiration. Whatever else it is, a poem that seems spoken is scrupulously written, forged from the syntax and diction at hand.

“We need to cure ourselves of the wish for biography,” says Adam Phillips in *Freud’s Impossible Life*, suggesting that the stories we tell about our own lives, inasmuch as they fix our lives, are driven by anxiety and fear. But if biographies were written in the manner of lyric poems, we’d find them wayward and inefficient—which might be, from the psychoanalytic perspective, a good thing. For even as poems tempt us to imagine the life of a speaker, poems are suspicious of biography. They ask us not to dispose of their language in favor of extractable information, as one might when reading about a poet’s life, but to dwell in their language, participating in an ongoing project of discovery rather than receiving its results. Because of the disposition of their language, some poems may feel spoken, while others may not, but all poems are happening now, in the time it takes to read them; there is nowhere else they could exist.