

# REFLECTIONS ON THE HUMAN VOICE AND THE POETRY OF DANA WARD WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO PINDAR

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In the 7<sup>th</sup> Isthmian Ode, Pindar relates an anecdote about the death of Strepsiades, the uncle of the victor whom he's been hired to celebrate (also named Strepsiades). After telling of the uncle's demise, the text switches from the past tense, third person narrative voice to the present tense, first person voice, and he writes, "I have an unspeakable grief" (*etlan . . . aphoton*). The unspeakability of this grief is strange, precisely on account of the fact that directly before making this claim, Pindar has been speaking of the reason for the grief, the occasion of which it grieves; moreover, to say "I have a grief" is, you know, to *say* it, and that obtains despite saying that it's unsayable.<sup>1</sup>

But in the following lines we learn how the unsayable grief is made utterable and can be formally designated as "grief." The very victory of the younger Strepsiades, and the accompanying Pindaric ode, make it possible to speak of this grief. Perhaps a translation that reveals the complex temporality of the narrated events would be more like: "I had a grief, unspeakable until the moment Strepsiades was victorious in the pankration and hired me to write this poem, in which I find myself speaking about the unheretofore speakable grief."

In Dana Ward's *Goodnight Voice*, the voice is, as in Pindar's poem, affirmed to be absence. It acknowledges the voice as such in the form of a speech act, that is, a *voice* says "goodnight voice," suggesting that it is presence which gives itself the name "absence," that *that-which-can-give-a-name* (to itself) *must be presence, even if it names itself "absence."*

In *Goodnight Voice* the presence that announces itself in order to, among other speech acts, designate itself as its negative, announces itself also in other terms of presence. "Dana" is the "medium" – but this is not best understood in a schema in which the "medium" refers to a specific Modernist occult understanding of that term, nor really in the Spicerian sense wherein the "outside" is purposely indeterminate, to be argued later as a mystical force, language itself, both, or neither.

The opening lines of *Goodnight Voice* address the issue of ownership over the utterance "I":

I think that I'm somebody else  
and that thought is city block common  
(*"Kerri Says"*)

The indeterminacy of the content of the "thought" is mirrored by the indeterminate relation between thinking "I am somebody else" and thinking *as* someone else. Benveniste argues that "it is what one can *say* that delimits and organizes what one can think."

In some ways, it is that such content is phraseable that determines its not-quite-contingency. The sayability of "I'm somebody else" cannot discard the voice that articulates its articulability. This is what those who have a human voice have in "common": a twin grief. The grief of speech is both that it can never say what it means and that it can never articulate its absence.

In *Ghostbusters*, Peter Venkman (Bill Murray) confronts Dana (Sigourney Weaver) who has been possessed by a Hittite demon named Zool. When Venkman addresses Dana/Zool as "Dana," Dana/Zool replies, "There is no Dana, only Zool." The "voice" of "Dana" is suppressed by the voice of Zool who, though inhabiting the body of Dana, disavows that identity, making the voice the better or sole source of authoritative identification. However, this "voice" is not deployed in a communicative function, for Venkman cannot dissociate Dana, given the information registered by his eyes, from "Dana" – Venkman treats the voice of Zool as a superimposition on the "true Dana."

"Dana" appears as a citable presence for "Dana" in "That Alice Notley and Jay-Z and Dana would Speak Through the Imperfect Media of Dana." In this text, the "I" is not just "an other" but three others at least ("Dana" is not a "medium" but "media," plural), and that includes "Dana" as *an other* which will speak through "Dana."

So I'm a Horatio Alger condemned by my desert and city nativity  
diamond hand over November the white picket shutter of night's  
northern face  
down the Rue Calincourt St. Mark's Place & Ft. Thomas  
& Marcy I say with impertinence all here together as falsely  
though no lie to me

The opening statement that the three voices inhere to make is that "I'm a Horatio Alger." The uncanniness resides in the formulation, the indefinite article that defers an already disfigured identification. The device recurs in the rest of the poem as agglutinative not selective, i.e. the three voices do not fight for authority in the text, but lend to a singular figure. "Together" is "falsely" because beyond the "singular feeling," the voice does not permit numerous agents in expression (except as mimicry of an other which this text is clearly not attempting).

The voice names all of its places of origin, all of its lovers ("Sarah/ Doug/ Ted/ Beyonce.") The qualities, the voice says, "no one can separate."

The self I make up from constituent loves is a singular  
thing that the market can alter the horror  
of being unloved. . .

Agency given to both the "I" (who "makes the self") and the others (the "loves" who are "constituent") again only *appears*, in the voice, the "singular thing."

This singular voice laments the impossibility of expressing its polyvalent constituency, except that by *saying so* a textual problem emerges, similar to Pindar's "I have an unspeakable grief."

Such statements assume a zone of not-language, but paradoxically this zone itself can be signified (by such phrases as "A zone of not-language"). What is the place of not-language?

Benveniste: "Content receives form when it is uttered, and only thus."

Dana writes, "You have to console what expands beyond language with powerlessness." This indicates to me that for "Dana" agency is only imaginable as language, even as it calls itself negativity, as when Pindar states in speech that he cannot-say. Whatever is "beyond" language nevertheless finds powerlessness "consoling," which underscores the real grief of speech particular to Dana's work. If there is an acknowledgement that agency occurs only in speech, this agency is always *imperfect media*, always "crude and fragile like sewing a thumb on a marshmallow hammer." "I have one," the poem continues, "my grammar & meter."

Is there a redemption for the sheer negativity of the unsayable? Does anyone even want there to be one?

Is it prosody, the "silent music" through which the voice manifests (even if it does so only to deface itself). The redemption in Pindar's poem is prosodic and economical. A great deed does redeem the grief from the realm of the unsayable, but this is only verified or enacted in terms of the "saying," that is, Pindar's poem.

In "Dana's" work, redemption is certainly not so assured or probably not even desired,<sup>2</sup> but something like it might reside in the affirmation of the other through finally speechless, haptic contact.

#### I Can't Feel My Face

I can't feel my face  
but would have you still feel it  
so I could say 'O  
there it is.'  
No one can touch  
or destroy what is worthless.  
Forbid me – we come  
to a sponge station I  
notice the full spectral dominance  
feel the elite  
in final sparkling strands.  
The phone rings  
in the bones of my face  
it is also my neck, my back, my neck & my back.  
I ask her not to be the one to let me die alone.

The opening statement, "I can't feel my face," means of course both that the experience of the having the face cannot be uttered in feeling-language (is thus formless and thus not real except as prosody can extract it) and also that touching one's own face is not the same as "feeling" it – for that is another grief of the voice, it's always already dehiscence: one's voice always "sounds strange," but "feels" familiar, so lacking in strangeness as to be, and this is real grief, "unremarkable."

The other, becoming the "I," *can* feel it, and can elicit the remark, "O / there it is." "O," not "Oh." This is not the "Oh!" of *Eureka!* but the "O" of a vocative address. A vocative address to what? To the phrase, "there it is." This vocative to deixis explains why "No one can touch / or destroy what is worthless." Objects, faces, Dana's apartment in *Ghostbusters*, all of these can be destroyed, but as long as there is voice, there is deixis, worthless in that, constituting the grief of voice, it is never defined as anything outside the breadth of its own being-uttered.

It is the death of the voice that signals the death of the human. Venkman cannot kill Dana/Zool, for he is in love with what he must desperately assert is *there*, superimposed upon by the voice of Zool. There is some sense of affirmation, that the ongoing presence of the other means the ongoing presence of remarks and remarkable things. The deictic acknowledges a world beyond language which is purely made of just language. Just footprints.<sup>3</sup>

#### NOTES:

<sup>1</sup> There is a problem in this paragraph concerning the use of "say" and "write," which is complicated, given the historical status of Pindar's "texts." There is no evidence of Pindar as a "writer," and the texts he made were most certainly intended for public recitation in the victor's hometown by singers. However, that said, the unorthodox meters with which he made his poems, far from the dactylic hexameter of Homer, perfectly suitable to memorization, might suggest that another technology was in place to assist with the preservation of the text.

<sup>2</sup> Dana, unlike Pindar, is not often paid vast sums of money for his work.

<sup>3</sup> I want to provide a citation for this last phrase, because the text in which it appears is being to some degree concealed. In the infamous 1978 Poetry Center event commemorating the life and work of Louis Zukofsky, as Barrett Watten was delivering his remarks, Robert Duncan ascended the stage and interrupted him. Duncan, obviously referencing the burgeoning work of Watten (and pointedly "claiming" Zukofsky as disapproving from the grave), says (to paraphrase), "there is no such thing as just language. There is no such thing as just language any more than there is just footprints."