

Mary di Michele: on the Integrity of Speech and Silence

by Nathalie Cooke

"The Primer," the first poem of *Luminous Emergencies*,¹ is a watershed for Mary di Michele. As the title suggests, this poem marks a point of departure for her. It comes at a time when she is turning to new subject matter, and to new forms of writing; indeed, the beginnings of such a shift are evident even in this volume, in the Chilean poems, and in the prose poem, "The Body at the End of the World." Such works form a bridge between di Michele's poetry to date and her current explorations in prose. More my concern here, however, "The Primer" marks a turning point in di Michele's exploration of the confessional form. It is at once the most sophisticated of her confessional poems and a farewell to the form as she has used it. Just as "The Primer" marks a point of departure for di Michele, so too it would seem to serve as an excellent point of entry into her work. Or it would, if it were not for the fact that my opening this discussion with "The Primer" is like diving into a pool at the deep end. For this poem raises and scrutinizes the knotty issues at the heart of di Michele's project: the discursive politics of the confession, for example, and the related and equally problematic issue of the poet's "integrity." Their significance in relation to di Michele's work requires further explanation.

First, integrity: this is di Michele's own term. In her introduction to eleven women poets (herself among them) whose works she anthologizes in *Anything is Possible*, di Michele explains:

This collection represents a new generation of women writers whose language is a kind of truth serum, asking pointed question [sic] of the speaker as well as of the words themselves spoken. With deep feeling, but without sentimentality, these poets describe the world as they see it. Because they are women to whom the world of feeling has been abandoned by many men and because they are incisively intelligent, *their work has a special integrity* and a facility to illuminate some vital areas of experience which have been ignored by our literature to date. [emphasis mine]²

As di Michele uses the term integrity here, its meaning seems clear enough. By suggesting that the common objective of these eleven poets is to forge "an acute and passionate language," a "kind of truth serum," she is talking, not only about poetic voice and vision, but also about values. And, as she makes clear by the use of the first-person plural, they are *her* values as well. "The politics of these poets has little to do with the process or machinations of an act of parliament (more the pity for parliament) but a lot to do with what we consciously choose to value, how we are *determined* to live."³ It seems only appropriate that di Michele chooses to use the word integrity; she is describing a deep commitment to a principle that is at

once aesthetic and moral.

In her own work, that commitment to describing the world as she sees it emerges very early. In those works she describes as "breakthrough" poems, di Michele explores the things she knows best — her family, herself. Robert Billings writes, "What emerges from this breakthrough is at once a new toughness, a welcome and necessary movement away from flat or moody description, and a new sensitivity, an ability to discover precisely how she feels and to express that feeling directly and honestly."⁴ Billings is right in so far as these breakthrough poems lead di Michele to ground her work in personal experience. But even in such an early poem as "Born in August" we see di Michele shifting her focus from herself to the larger issues that concern her. This is a powerful statement about context and recontextualization as much as it is a poem about the girl born Maria Luisa di Michele.

Born in the fifth house
under the sign of Leo
on the sixth of August,
four years after Hiroshima, 180 years after the birth
of Napoleon Bonaparte,
born Maria Luisa di Michele,
baptized at Santa Lucia
in an ancient town, Lanciano, the Abruzzi,
scarred by cruel claws
of war, the fangs of tyranny:
Austerlitz, Auschwitz, Hiroshima,
born with the rising sun
the predator moon, a lion,
born from my mother's dream
when a rat nursed her face
in the concentration camps,
sucking the breast of famine
my mother lost her teeth
while I grew miniature bones
like pearls in an oyster mouth.⁵

As di Michele explains, her poetry is a synthesis,⁶ poetry that grows out of and moves beyond personal experience.

It is only on one level, then, that di Michele tells her story "honestly" and "directly." On this level it is the story of an Italian-Canadian who is a woman and a poet; it is also a story about *being* an Italian-Canadian, a woman and a poet. As such, di Michele's personal poems describe three aspects of her personality and record three distinct but parallel pursuits. An immigrant to Canada, di Michele feels the need to find a voice, a tongue with which to break the barrier of silence between herself and those who see her as foreign. "You needed an illustrated dictionary/ to translate your meals,/ looking to the glossy pages of vegetables/ *melanzane* became eggplant."⁷ As a woman, she longs for an identity, a definition that she can communicate to herself and to others.⁸ And as a poet, di Michele searches for an audience with whom she can identify and to whom she can identify

herself. The relationship between these quests is that they all take di Michele from silence to speech, for, although we are "told" di Michele's story, the narrator is a mature poet who has already found her voice and vocation.

Of the younger di Michele we catch only glimpses; she is relegated to faded snapshots, school photos, or unreliable memories embedded in the poems. That the story of Mary di Michele's early years is presented in visual rather than verbal terms serves to emphasize her silence. We do not "hear" her; we "see" her. She becomes the subject or what Roland Barthes calls the "spectrum" of her poetry — the spectacle within it and the spectre who haunts it.⁹ The effect of di Michele's description of her early life is that of a collage: juxtaposed snapshots of the same young girl in different poses, always unmov ing, always silent. Posing for a passport photo, she is a "waif girl" frightened into submission before the camera.¹⁰ She is "etherized" by a Kodak, "pinned" by a camera,¹¹ and her "black and white" image is viewed by those within the poem and without. For her parents' friends, characters within the poem, the photograph of di Michele at three years of age is "propped up on the table." The di Michele within the poem does not speak to her readers, she is "a feast for their eyes."¹²

The phrasing of these passages already suggests that di Michele is aware that beneath the surface of her personal poems, with their illusion of "honesty" and "directness," lies a certain indirection or lack of integrity: the problematic integration of the di Michele *within* the poem and the di Michele who writes the poem. (Here, of course, I am shifting my discussion to a different kind of integrity — "wholeness" rather than "honesty" [Oxford] — that operates on a different level in di Michele's work.) In "Heart of Ruby," for instance, di Michele alerts her readers, not only to the separation between viewer and viewed, speaker and spoken, but also to the intricate and shifting balances of power.

This poem leads you
as formal as a footman
through the doors of perception
and into a hall
where it introduces you to the poet
who is displayed

like a mantis in amber,
like a beetle in resin
like a fly suspended
in a web of seed pearls,

housed in the four-chambered
heart of a ruby.¹³

Of course the poet plays two very different roles in this poem: to use di Michele's metaphor, she is both the guide and the object on display. As guide, or what Barthes would call the "operator," her power lies in her ability to organize the spectacle and direct the viewing. As display or "spectrum," she surrenders to the spectacle. Seemingly powerless, she is "displayed/ like a mantis in amber,/ like a beetle in resin."

Di Michele's dilemma is that neither position makes her particularly comfortable. Most obviously, the di Michele within the poems refuses to remain on display without voicing her objections. While she understands that she is expected to "smile and submit,"¹⁴ as a school-girl and even as an adult, she ultimately refuses to "submit" to domination.¹⁵ As the words "submit" and "dominate" suggest, the older di Michele becomes increasingly unwilling to remain silent, precisely *because* it is expected of her. Speaking, she understands, constitutes an act of rebellion — so she speaks out in her writing. Herein lies the problem. It is the narrator who speaks; and in speaking for the younger and silent di Michele within the poems, she silences her once again. Not only is the younger di Michele silent in these poems, but she is also silenced by them. For as di Michele tells the story of her silencing so, ironically, she restages that silencing. By writing poetry she can only exchange roles: instead of being the one who is forced into silence she becomes the one who imposes silence. She cannot escape, in other words, from the hierarchy of power that the written word establishes. At the heart of di Michele's project, then, is an ethical and aesthetic dilemma that threatens her poetic integrity: how can a poet speak out against the appropriation of voice when the very act of speaking constitutes a similar violation? In her poetry di Michele explores three tentative solutions to this problem.

I

That the subject of di Michele's poems are, in large part, the concerns of those from whom we normally would not hear—the silenced—suggests the first strategy. Although empowered by her role as poet and speaker, she is careful to voice the concerns of the powerless—children, immigrants, women. Paradoxically, in her personal poems, di Michele the poet articulates her own perspective. She is both the symbol within her poetry—the child who is silenced because she is a part of a "very patriarchal" Italian-Canadian family,¹⁶ who grows into a woman of whom silence is also expected—and the manipulator of that symbol. Di Michele the poet speaks for herself, tells her own story; poet and subject seem almost interchangeable.

In "Snapshot," the poem's speaker comments on this slippery relationship between artist and subject by pointing out that the photographer Diane Arbus uses a similar strategy in her own work.

she caught what you wouldn't see:
your averted eyes, your face behind the box —

because knowing how to frame anything alive
makes it art,

because she felt lost but couldn't remember
how it happened.

Setting the Leica on self-timer
then rushing into her subject's clothes.¹⁷

Arbus' particular talent, di Michele suggests, depends not so much on her ability to

frame anything living — this is the task of all artists—but on her ability to catch "what you wouldn't see," as well that her uncanny ability to rush into her subject's clothing. The first skill makes her a photographer. (Poets catch what one would not *hear*.) The second is a function of her gender. "If Diane Arbus hadn't been born a woman," writes di Michele in the opening of the poem, "she would have had an operation/ because a woman understands the body best/ as surrender to spectacle."¹⁸ Implicit in such a statement is the suggestion that women artists are (or must be) aware of the imbalance of power between artist and subject, between the one who frames the spectacle and the one who "surrenders" to it. What are those imbalances of power? It is Susan Sontag who articulates most explicitly the connection between the camera and sexual politics:

The camera doesn't rape, or even possess, though it may presume, intrude, trespass, distort, exploit, and, at the farthest reach of metaphor, assassinate — all activities that, unlike the sexual push and shove, can be conducted from a distance, and with some detachment.¹⁹

Although Sontag qualifies the relationship between the power politics of photography and sexual transactions, she goes on to outline the "central fantasy connected with the camera":

The camera as phallus is, at most, a flimsy variant of the inescapable metaphor that everyone unselfconsciously employs. However hazy our awareness of this fantasy, it is named without subtlety whenever we talk about "loading" and "aiming" a camera, about "shooting" a film.²⁰

"Snapshot" suggests that both Arbus and di Michele, as artists and women, share a responsibility to their subjects. Of course, in "Snapshot" Arbus' ability to change into her subject's clothes, to shift positions in the photographic transaction, is a metaphor for her particular empathy with the "spectra" of her photographs. In di Michele's personal poems, however, the relationship between artist and subject is a literal one—and in two different ways. One: there is an intimate relationship between the di Michele who writes the poems and her protagonist of the same name. Two: the relationship between artist and subject is literal because di Michele is a poet. However obvious this statement may seem, it bears repeating. For it is crucial that we retain the distinction between visual and verbal in discussions of di Michele's work. Although di Michele invites the comparison between her work in a verbal medium and the work of others in the visual arts, we must ultimately distinguish between visual and discursive politics.

For instance, in a poem such as "Beauty and Dread in 1959" di Michele does articulate the position of the woman who has surrendered to spectacle. This poem is particularly interesting because it helps to clarify the relationship of visual and verbal artistry in di Michele's work. Throughout her work, di Michele shows herself to be acutely aware of the power politics of visual spectacle, and of woman's powerlessness as object of the gaze—in paintings, films and magazines, even in family snapshots. In "Beauty and Dread in 1959" she writes of the figures in Manet's *Dejeuner sur l'herbe*:

Actually you forget them all
except for the one sitting nude
on the white linen of her dress
as if she were the lunch
rather than enjoying it.

She's the sort of game
some hunt with a camera.²¹

As a girl, old enough to worry that her "skirt ride up/ and show too much leg," di Michele identifies herself with the woman in this picture. As a woman, she feels more like the hunted than the hunter, a violent metaphor that echoes Sontag's description of the politics of the visual spectacle. Nevertheless, both she and her reader must realize that di Michele identifies and frames such instances of visual spectacle within her own poetry. If she identifies herself with the women within the pictures—the nude in Manet's painting, cigar-store centrefolds, Natassia Kinski in Dick Avedon's photograph, the body in the chart of human anatomy in the biology lab—she must also acknowledge her role as artist and "operator" (to use Barthes' very suggestive term).

That she guides and directs her reader in this poem is further evidence that there remains a crucial difference between the visual and verbal medium. In order to defend her initial statement, "As a girl I was ignorant! of my body" di Michele details her education about the female form. She gradually amasses enough visual evidence for her reader to realize that her education is lacking because it does not include information about the female body from the female point of view. But while pictures supply the evidence for this argument, the points are made in words.

My body was changing
in a human way
but it felt grotesque.

I'd already been told
by Freud and the boys
what I didn't have.²²

This poem does not function like an untitled painting or a snapshot; it makes a statement about them.

II

Not only does the "I" in a poem such as "Beauty and Dread in 1959" allow Mary di Michele to tell the story of visual spectacle from the woman's point of view — "I was ignorant of *my* body" — it also creates a certain sense of intimacy. The speaker in this poem is describing something very personal; she is not only speaking from a woman's point of view, but she is also clearly speaking from *her* point of view as well. This sense of intimacy here and elsewhere in di Michele's poetry leads to the problematic subject of the confessional elements in her work; for di Michele is interested in the confession because it is a form of writing in which the speaker seems to be both scrupulously honest (which brings us back to the notion of integrity) and relatively powerless. As such, the confession provides a

second strategy for di Michele, a useful vehicle through which to communicate her critique of power.

But what is confessional writing? In the only book-length analysis of the genre, Robert Phillips isolates honesty as the central principle of confessional poetry.

Whatever the cost in public exposure or private anguish, their subjects are most often themselves and always the things they most intimately know. The emotions that they portray are always true to their own feelings. And the opinions they express are born of deep personal conviction, not currency of literary fashion.²³

Clearly, Phillips' reference to "deep personal conviction" is strikingly reminiscent of di Michele's own notion of poetic "integrity." Here, however, my purpose is neither to describe di Michele's work as confessional nor to defend that description. A disproportionate amount of the commentary on di Michele's work has already focused on this task. Billings, for example, explores her poetry by exploring the influences — "chance meetings, authors, libraries, friendships, politics, reviews and reviewers" — that have affected di Michele as a person.²⁴ This, despite the fact that her poetry has, even now, received almost no other extensive critical analysis.

Instead, the term "confessional" is used within this discussion of moral and aesthetic integrity because it sheds light on one particular aspect of di Michele's poetry, the "connectedness" of poet, protagonist and audience. It is precisely this aspect of di Michele's writing that is stressed by her most perceptive reader, Bronwen Wallace. (That di Michele dedicates *Luminous Emergencies* to "Bronwen Wallace, *la melleure, ma soeur*" suggests the very special understanding these two writers shared.) Says Wallace,

What Mary does specifically, I think, is to use the poem as a process of exposure by which the repressed, the new, the unsayable is finally spoken. This is "confessional" poetry with an important political and aesthetic difference in that the poet writes, not from a sense of her "peculiarity" or her isolation, but from her sense of collectivity and connectedness with other women. . . .²⁵

What makes Wallace's use of the term "confessional" so helpful is that she is talking less about the personal content of di Michele's poetry (the thrust of Billings' discussion and Rosemary Sullivan's warnings to the young writer²⁶) than about the process of writing. As Wallace describes it, those two problematic terms "confession" and "integrity" meet in di Michele's work through her sense of "connectedness" with other women. For Wallace suggests that di Michele speaks not only to integrate herself into a community — one goal of the confessional mode²⁷ — but because she already feels that she is integrated into a community. Wallace goes on to explain that this community is not an elite group of women or women poets. Rather, she explains, the "feminist view" (and here is the sense of vision, and view and values again) is "a part of how any reasonably perceptive human being would look at the world."

Further, Bronwen Wallace uses the term "confessional" with reference to di Michele's work in a letter dated September 26, 1984, presumably drawing this

conclusion from reading and hearing the poems of *Tree of August, Bread and Chocolate*, and *Mimosa and Other Poems*. Perhaps, too, she was familiar with some of the poems that would be collected in di Michele's *Immune to Gravity*. But the truth of Wallace's statement is not revealed to di Michele's readers until the publication of *Luminous Emergencies* and, in particular, of the poem that begins the collection, "The Primer." It is here that di Michele finally speaks the unspeakable; and it is here too that di Michele proves herself to be acutely aware of the discursive politics of the confessional form:

The girl is rumpled,
O the girl is layered
as an onion and tearful and tight.
The girl is six
years old behind a locked
door. He pulls her panties down.
Because of something he can't feel
he touches.
Yes.

As Wallace anticipates, the significance of this revelation lies not so much in what is said (although such troubling subject matter is the stuff of confessional poetry), but *how* it is said, for she is clearly uncomfortable with the powerful statement this poem makes. The title suggests that this poem was always the first one of the collection. But in the earlier drafts of *Luminous Emergencies* this passage is couched in the fifth section of the fifth poem of the section. Note too the distance the speaker maintains from the protagonist of this poem. "The girl": third person singular. "The girl is six.

Paradoxically, though, in her refusal to integrate the girl within the poem and the speaker of it, text and author, di Michele invites her readers to explore their various relationships.

They [the readers?] think we're the same
but we're *not*, the writer
and the text. You see she called me in
to interpret. They're immigrants
and that's *not* the whole
story as you may suspect.
If I could tell it to you!
No, it's just what she remembers
perhaps just what she *wants*
to remember
that's all I've got to work with.
But what she forgets is just as important.
What she forgets is more
important. (VII. 1-14)

Although in this passage the speaker identifies herself as the girl's "interpreter," in the stanza before we learn that the little girl is the one who grows up to write this poem.

That the greatest gift offered
was the gift of an English dictionary
may sound made up when I tell
you that she grew up to write poetry.
That she rejected this gift
may account for her difficulty
in getting started and her equivocation
about the composition of this poem. (VI. 9-16)

At first glance, then, the young protagonist and the poet she becomes stand between di Michele and the troubling subject matter of this poem. So, too, her (the girl's, the speaker's and di Michele's) "difficulty! in getting started and her equivocation! about the composition of this poem" frame the events the poem describes. The circumlocutionary language couches the horror:

That she could say *yes*
Or no was not yet understood. That's
understood. That she learned
to say no before she learned to say
yes may be significant. That with her no
he offered greater gifts is not
surprising but knowledge
she has to put to good use. (VI. 1-8)

And the power of the word "no," the negative turn, sometimes seems almost powerful enough to cancel the horror. "They think we're the same! but we're *not*. . . that's *not* the whole! story. . . If I could tell it to you!! *No*, it's just what she remembers! perhaps just what she *wants!* to remember." But that is not the case; for surely the horror lies precisely in the speaker's need to equivocate, to distance herself from the pain to which she confesses, and from the painful process of confession.

This leads to an interesting point: here di Michele's experimentation with speaker and voice is a direct function of the confessional impulse in her work. Di Michele's refusal to identify herself completely with the young girl means that the confession occurs not on one level, but on at least three different levels: the girl's confession to her "interpreter," the speaker's interpretation of the girl's disclosure, and di Michele's written account. In turn, of course, each of these three levels correspond to different stages of the confessional process: experience, recognition and articulation. But never does di Michele bring herself to name the horror. Like the answer to a riddle, it is the subject of the discourse from which it is conspicuously absent. In this complicity lies a certain integrity. The girl is not alone: the process of confession is shared and paralleled by the speaker and the poet on the various levels of this complex and moving poem.

III

That "The Primer" differs from di Michele's other confessional poems not only in its intensity, but also in the way di Michele positions the speaker within the poem is of further significance. Her other confessional poems, even the early "breakthrough" poems, are characterized by an intimate relationship between the

poet behind the poem and the speaker/protagonist within the poem. Di Michele creates the impression that they are interchangeable; often, they share the first-person singular. In "The Primer," however, the first-person narrator of the poem identifies herself as an interpreter. She is telling the girl's story. Indeed, part of her confession involves the inadequacy of her medium. What the speaker tells us is "just what she remembers! perhaps just what she *wants!* to remember." "That's all I've got to work with," she explains, a silent shrug slipping through the lines of the page.

By repositioning the speaker this way, di Michele strips her of much of her power. No longer is the relationship between speaker and protagonist that of spectator and spectacle, the one who frames the spectacle and the one who surrenders to it. Instead, the speaker/interpreter works *with* the young girl, she is able to speak for her without usurping or appropriating her story. Instead, the burden of power lies with the interrogator. For the format of the poem suggests that someone is asking the questions, interrogating the girl. "*No*, she doesn't remember. . . ." "Yes, she does remember. . . ." To some extent, of course, the speaker/interpreter is the one who poses the questions directly to the girl. But, as readers, don't we also pose questions of the girl. What did happen? What is the relationship between girl, speaker and poet? These are the questions never articulated within the text but that nevertheless emerge in the production of its meaning.

The relationship between speaker and reader shifts dramatically in this poem. In a confessional poem the speaker within the poem presents her case before a