THE SPEAKING VOICE IN THE BOOK OF LAMENTATIONS

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THIS examination of the speaking voice in the Book of Lamentations will not discuss the authorship of the book. The attribution of the work to the prophet Jeremiah is fundamentally a question of historical judgment. The attempt to identify the speaking voice, the subject of our concentration at the moment, is a stylistic concern. In this context, literary criticism sometimes uses the term *persona*, i.e., the mask or characterization assumed by the poet as the medium through which he perceives and gives expression to his world.

The *persona* is not to be thought of as a fiction. It is a creative procedure in the displacement of the poet's imagination beyond the limitations of his single viewpoint so that he may gain a manifold insight into the human experience. The poet's manifold creative insight then becomes the ground by which the reader achieves a more powerful perception of the creative situation. If the use of one *persona* by the poet enriches his intuition, the use of the five *personae* discernible in Lamentations should of itself deepen and broaden the reader's grasp of the dynamics of the spiritual experience embodied by the book. Another man's consciousness of the world is available to us only through his statements, and only imperfectly at that; the richer his statement, the more rewarding our entrance into his experience.

The most obvious example of the existence of a *persona* in the Book of Lamentations appears in the first two chapters, in those verses (1:9c, 11c-22; 2:20-22) during which Jerusalem speaks in her own voice. Obviously, the city of Jerusalem cannot speak except in some figurative sense, but it is precisely this personification of the city which expresses the anguish of these verses. However, this Jerusalem does not merely register a community complaint as a political abstraction; it characterizes itself as a particular woman whose specific feelings are embodied in a certain texture of imagery.

The very existence of the easily identified *persona* of Jerusalem provokes in the reader a reflex awareness of the second voice to be heard in these chapters (1:1-11b, 15a, 17; 2:1-19): a more objective reporter whose cooler descriptive statements contrast with the passionate outbursts of Jerusalem. It is this reporter's voice which may strike the reader as the poet's authentic voice, but such an assessment appears manifestly inadequate and even simplistic after reading the entire book. Distinct voices are discernible in each of the subsequent three chapters. Are we then to stipulate that only one of the five voices speaking in Lamentations is the "sincere mode" of expression used by the poet? To equate impersonation

with hypocrisy in this way would be to confuse an aesthetic category with a moral judgment. When the poet chooses to write certain passages without adopting an alien characterization as his focus of perception, he is making just as explicit and deliberate a decision as he does in adopting a *persona.* Furthermore, to presume that the least radical departure from the comfortably objective viewpoint must be the most authentic speaking voice would be to equate sincerity with the most banal level of imagination and deny vitality to those levels of the poet's consciousness on which he is attempting to grasp a world which is dissolving before his eyes.

On the other hand, if this examination of Lamentations should succeed in distinguishing five separable *personae* in the course of the book, would it not succeed in destroying the unity of the book, dissecting a totality into a series of discrete statements? Would such a success imply multiple authorship?

On the contrary, the variety of voices sketches the topography of a unique spiritual consciousness which can realize itself only by projecting its grief in its constituent phases by adopting different *personae.* This ultimate unity should emerge as a single controlling awareness from the detailed examination of the five *personae* to which we shall now proceed.

The first voice to be overheard in Lamentations is that of someone who approaches the city of Jerusalem only to find it deserted and forsaken, abandoned by its inhabitants and oppressed by its enemies, resembling a widow forced to work like a serf (1:1). The roads to Zion and the city gates no longer bustle with traffic; the speaker is particularly aware of the absence of crowds he had seen on some earlier visit to Jerusalem. The precise event which has turned the city into a ghost town is not identified here; only the vacuum is described, the picture of the city's desolation and its emptiness under the punitive will of God (vs. 5). The speaker is preoccupied with the dialectic of past glory and present misery; he perceives the misery only within the memory of the glory. He provides neither continuity nor crisis between past and present; he depicts an image of the suddenly empty city against his recollection of its former activity by a verbal diptych.

He sees that Jerusalem has abruptly become the mere object of the scornful gaze of the passers-by who had once respected her. Now they see her naked, whining, fallen to the ground, her skirts fouled with pollution (vss. 8-9), ravished (vs. 10), her people so hungry that they have sold their own children in order to buy food for themselves (vs. 11). The reporter does not maintain a stringent distinction between Jerusalem-as-city and Jerusalem-as-woman through to the end of this sequence of verses. In either capacity, however, Jerusalem is an object bereft of all dignity, reduced to the level of a thing to be gawked at. The personification functions at this point merely as a rhetorical device by which the city's degradation is intensified. Converting the city into a woman makes her fall all the more shameful. The speaker sees the disgrace of the city as the other passers-by see the disgrace, but he sees it with a certain rudimentary pity when he sees a despondent woman in the ruins of Jerusalem.

When this first voice resumes speaking at the beginning of ch. 2, the em-

phasis on visual imagery which distinguishes the reporter from the voice of Jerusalem returns as well. He now describes the Lord in the act of destroying Israel. Like an angry warrior the Lord has torn down the fortresses of Judah (vs. 2), he has caused the defeat of the armies (vs. 3), he has turned his own bow and sword against his people and destroyed them with the fire of his wrath (vss. 4-5). Not only did God spurn his own sanctuary, he carefully planned the tearing down of Jerusalem's walls (vss. 7-8). The princes are captives, the prophets without visions, the people without hope (vss. 9-10). At this point, however, a significant shift in tone modifies the reporter's description.

Up to this point the speaker has depicted God as the sacker of the city: epic in his stature, gigantic in his anger, relentless in the totality of his destructiveness. The emptiness of the city noted in ch. 1 can be explained: God has devastated his own city. The reporter is following the sequence of his own perceptions rather than the chronological sequence of events; he has seen the devastation before depicting its infliction, he has discovered the effect before fully identifying the cause for the reader. The imagery of the opening verse of ch. 2 is energetically pictorial, fully presenting God in terms of physical activity. If the descriptive passages at the beginning of ch. 1 may be classified as static tableaux, this anthropomorphic portrait of God is cinematic. And yet with vs. 9 there is a sudden abatement from the violent activity, a crash of silence.

No one preaches in Jerusalem; everyone now sits mute in the dust. The reporter becomes noticeably sympathetic, for his heart is moved by the starving children, whimpering, fainting, dying (vss. 11-12). He is left without poetic resources, for he feels the grief deeply; and grief like all other pain defies any adequate expression beyond screams and tears. The only simile he can find for the ruination of the city is the wide sea — chaotic, elemental, unbridgeable. Jerusalem fell because her prophets had failed her. Their words were whitewash and frauds (vs. 14), and now the city lies in rubble and silence.

Now there reappear in vss. 15-16 those passers-by who mock the nakedness of Jerusalem in ch. 1 (vs. 8) and to whom Jerusalem has addressed the opening phrases of her soliloquy (v. 12). The reporter has also seen the city but has not mocked; his sympathy for her has so far transcended mere observation that he experiences the same churning of the bowels (2:11) that Jerusalem has also experienced (1:20). The only appropriate procedure now is to lament the misery of the city, but since that is Jerusalem's personified role in the earlier chapter, the reporter now invites her to resume her outcry (vss. 18-19).

The reporter might have seen no more than the jeering passers-by saw except for the entropic spasm sparked by the sight of the starving children. In that one moment of commiseration with its kinesthetic reflex the description loses its purely analytic, pictorial texture. Now the voice of Jerusalem is not merely inserted between two reportorial statements; it responds to the reporter's invitation to speak, as if the surrender of the aloofness of the spectator prompted a dialogue.

The second voice of Lamentations is that of Jerusalem herself, i.e., the hypostatized anguish of the fallen city. She begins by appealing to God to consider

her humiliation (1:11c) and to the passers-by to consider her pain (vs. 12). The cry is not for further looking at her misery but for pitiful looking; no longer can Jerusalem allow herself to be a mere object to be observed, but rather she requires humane attentiveness, a look accompanied by compassion. True, she has been demeaned by God in his anger, burnt, trapped in the net, yoked by the neck (vss. 13-14), but she is also the mother of the dead young soldiers, weeping for the misery of her children (vss. 15-16). Jerusalem willingly admits the folly of her past behavior towards God in her making of futile alliances with the gentiles (vss. 18-19), but her poor people are now suffering captivity (vs. 18), famine (vs. 19), and violent death (vs. 20), while her oppressors rejoice (vs. 21). Jerusalem is totally powerless and abandoned, inconsolable and despondent; her only prayer is not for delivery, but for the equal affliction of her oppressors by God's anger (vs. 22).

The imagery employed by Jerusalem in her lament is in striking contrast to the visual imagery employed by the reporter. Through these verses she speaks of herself as trapped in a net, given over to her enemies; in her midst lies a heap of her dead warriors who have been crushed out in the winepress; her eyes run with tears; she is filled with pain; her bowels are churning and her heart is turning over; she is groaning and heartsick. Not only do such statements convey her deepest feelings, but they also associate her passions with a sense of kinesthetic oppression. The subjective awareness insisted upon in these verses is that internal experience one has of one's own vital organs, one's posture, one's musculature, one's freedom to move within one's personal sphere of space.

The kinesthetic sense is the most personally experienced, the most interiorly focused, the most difficult to communicate in words of the human sensorium. Of all the senses it is the most unlike seeing; it allows no distancing, no perspective, no proportion, no analytical judgment. From the vague discomfort of subliminal indigestion to the blinding pain of insupportable anguish, it cannot be blinked away by the conscious mind. One blurs one's awareness with analgesics or one falls into unconsciousness, but one cannot think oneself free. Even her admission of guilty responsibility cannot alleviate Jerusalem's suffering. Self-reproach does not soften the pain.

The judgmental attitude belongs rather to the passers-by, and it is only the reporter's rush of compassion for the children which stands between him and the "Jerusalem is simply getting just what she deserves" sneers of those other, disengaged observers of her misery. It is through entropy, the physiological accompaniment to his sympathy, that the reporter enters into the sorrow of Jerusalem. When towards the end of ch. 2 (vss. 18-19) he invites the city to cry out once again, he phrases his cue to Jerusalem in the kinesthetic range of imagery: cry from the heart, weep like a perpetual flood, and pour out your heart; arise and do not rest, lift up your hands.

The voice of Jerusalem offers a final prayer lacking in any petition for specific help. She simply calls upon God to look upon the effects of his angry handiwork with pity (2:20-22). Her prayer evokes the imagery of falling and

lying still, of failing to run away and of being wiped out, the awareness of stasis, of nightmare paralysis. But if God will but look at this ruin, Jerusalem need ask nothing more.

The voices in chs. 3 and 4 seem to express individual perceptions in concrete situations. If the reader wishes to interpret certain aspects of the statements in these chapters as metaphor and convention because of parallel usages elsewhere in the Scriptures, he simply shifts the level of characterization from the individual speaker to the typical or even the allegorical speaker. In doing this, however, the reader who would detach the metaphor from its concrete basis in an individual *persona* runs the risk of accusing the poet of weaving a fabric of clichés without cohesive reference to a successfully rounded characterization. Thus, in ch. 3, the poet has assumed the *persona* of a defeated soldier; for a soul beleaguered by the world to assume the guise of a crusader is familiar enough in the mystical tradition since Paul, but to regard this as an outworn convention in our time is to ignore the original power of the *persona.* The speaker in ch. 3 may or may not have been a veteran of the siege of Jerusalem; the fact is that the poet perceives his spiritual downfall through the eyes of a defeated soldier.

That the speakers of chs. 3 and 4 enjoy the right to be distinguished from each other as well as from the reporter and Jerusalem receives some support from a consideration of formal patterns of composition in the first four chapters of Lamentations. These four chapters practise that deliberate manipulation of words common enough in Hebrew poetry, the acrostic structure. Chs. 1, 2, and 4 begin each of their strophes with the letters of the Hebrew alphabet in sequential order; ch. 3 is even more insistent on the structure by beginning each line within its three-line strophes with the same initial letter, changing from strophe to strophe in sequence. Ch. 4, on the other hand, provides only two lines to a strophe, while the earlier chapters have three lines to the strophe. Poetic form, therefore, unites chs. 1 and 2 into a unit while it sets off chs. 3 and 4. And yet the poetic form in each chapter is still a variation on the same fundamental structure of the alphabetical sequence. Such a structure offers the lamentations a movement of irreversible progression towards inevitable completion with the last letter of the alphabet. There is an inexorable certitude about the total fulfillment of God's punitive will. No chapter reaches a climax; there is merely the sense of denouement, the realization that the experiences march on and on towards exhaustive recitation.

The voice in ch. 3 is the *persona* of a soldier, a veteran who has endured hard use in the war. He protests that he was led into defeat by an officer who wished him to be defeated; we have already been told that it was God who led the army to defeat (1:15; 2:3-5, 22). The speaker has suffered fatigue and hunger (vs. 2), was held prisoner, and then wandered about amidst obstacles (vs. 3), fearfully and warily expected ambush at every turn (vs. 4), has been wounded in his vitals (vs. 5). His final bitterness is that he has become the butt of everyone's contempt (vs. 5). God has trampled him in the dirt so that he feels only despair (vs. 6). Despite his pain and dishonor, however, the young

man (vs. 8) is still flexible enough to hope for an ultimate exoneration (vss. 7c-13), because God will not deny justice to anyone forever. A battle has been lost, but perhaps not the war.

The distinction between past and present in the chapter thus far is the veteran's shift from recollection to evaluation. The speaker is now pausing in the memories of his pains to reflect on God's nature and to discover some measure of vague hope. The future can be envisioned only as that time beyond the present moment when God will no longer continue to punish his people. The only real time for the veteran is the present moment of reflective pause; the veteran can now dismiss his former sufferings since they were deserved by his past sins, and he can at least find some comfort in his boast that he has managed to survive into this present moment (vs. 13), an authentic axiom in the mouth of a regular soldier.

The veteran now turns to exhort some unidentified comrades (vs. 14), rallying them, urging them to admit their own guilt and to seek God in prayer as he has done. He leads them in prayer, but his self-confident intention fails him, and he erupts in an outburst of grief over God's withdrawal from his people (vss. 14c-15), the mockery of the victorious enemy (vs. 16), his blinding tears of defeat (vs. 17), and his entrapment in a pit filling up with water (vs. 18). At vs. 16c, the veteran reverts to the first person singular, giving up his group role in order to express his individual grief. He beseeches God to look with pity on his plight, for he is the victim of plots and jeers, and he invokes God to punish his enemies in the measure they deserve (vs. 22).

The veteran has passed through several phases of guilt, which he expresses in terminology most appropriate to a defeated soldier. At first he gratifies his desire to rationalize his own guilt by blaming his dishonor on God or on circumstances beyond his own control: his officer betrayed him into defeat, he was poorly supplied, he was captured, he was wounded. But he must still sustain the contempt of his countrymen, who find in him a scapegoat for their ruin, and of his enemies, who despise him as a loser. Another opportunity to evade his own guilt now presents itself: since God will someday provide another chance for him, he may simply disown his own share in the recent catastrophe. But this ready decision to confess and forget his own responsibility through a gesture of quick dismissal leads him not to the consolation of prayer and comradeship but to another outburst of self-pity.

The dominant image throughout the chapter has been that of encirclement: the speaker has been imprisoned, trapped in the drowning-pit, surrounded by his enemies, the guilt-ridden veteran can really escape neither by prayer nor by the subterfuge of self-exoneration. No delusion can release him from the inescapable trap, his own memory. If a man's memory constitutes his identity, the pit from which the veteran cannot rescue himself is himself.

In a final outburst of defiance against his enemies, he in fact admits his own impotency to strike out on his own behalf. His is no more than a partial vision of the meaning of his own condition: while acknowledging his own guilt and the

justice of God's punishment, he cannot surrender to the whole truth of his own share in the responsibility for the catastrophe.

If the voice of the veteran seems to echo the voice of Jerusalem, the voice of ch. 4 corresponds to the reporter's. The veteran feels himself trapped, the victim of the mocker's jeers; the city feels herself fallen, the object of the scorn of the passers-by. Their outcries are passionate, subjective, self-expressive, concerned with pity. The reporter is, in the main, detached, objective, descriptive, analytical; his compassion is evoked, a mirror, a reaction rather than a statement. The bourgeois who is the voice of ch. 4 recapitulates these attitudes in several ways.

The bourgeois is surprised by the economic and social upheaval within the fallen city. That gold and jewels are now treated with scorn is not only an exclamation leading to a simile comparing the maltreated citizens of Jerusalem, formerly of high regard, to discarded potsherds in their present condition (4:1-2) but also a transcendent statement about the devalued standards of life in the city. In this thoroughly disrupted society, gold is despised because it can no longer buy anything. There is nothing to buy: the starving children are worse off than the jackals' cubs, the rich are eating garbage (vss. 3-5). The aristocrats, once so fair to behold, are now reduced to skeletons; mothers cook and eat their own children (vss. 7-8, 10). God in his anger destroyed Jerusalem to the surprise of the world (vss. 11-12) because of the corruption of the prophets and priests (vss. 13-16). The harshness of this description of the aftermath of Jerusalem's fall and the analysis of its causes are hardly relieved by the cynicism: Jerusalem must have been worse than Sodom, which was destroyed in an instant and without all this agony (vs. 6); similarly, those who were killed violently in the fighting were luckier than those who survived only to starve to death in the city. The awareness of the difference between past and present, the note of mockery, and the pictorial presentation not only echo the reporter, but also introduce a comparison between this voice and the mocking passer-by who has appeared as a shadowy observer in all three of the earlier chapters of Lamentations.

The speaker is describing the total collapse of the state as a nation, as a people, and as a culture. His mind has operated on the level of social regalia, and he is both horrified and fascinated by the disjointing of the hierarchical structure of his world. In his old world, there were aristocrats above and beggars below. Now the aristocrats have lost the emblems of their prestige. Those who had built their identities on wealth and status now reveal in their downfall the destruction of that social structure which had once afforded them the deference due to their position. They have come to disregard the gold and jewelry, clothes and grooming which were the props of their former glory. Ironically, it was the failure of leadership that incurred God's wrath; since the leaders refused to fulfill their function, they have been deprived of its forms. The utter devaluation of what was once considered the measure of achievement and dignity is itself God's judgment on Jerusalem: the emptiness of the aristocratic class has been revealed as both the cause and the symbol of the ruination. The speaker does

not seem to grasp this clearly. He is the average citizen who is both amazed and somewhat gratified at the reversal which has reduced his leaders to beggary and which has inverted society so thoroughly that the first have indeed been made last, the exalted have indeed been humbled.

But the bourgeois has some sense of identity with his fellow-citizens. He shifts to the first person plural in order to describe the widespread foreboding of danger experienced either while staying in the besieged city (vss. 17-18) or while attempting to flee to the mountains or into the desert (vss. 19-20). He is a man who had accepted the social structure of his world at face value, and his feelings have seemed less intense than any of the other three voices heard in the book. His has been but a kind of dismay at the dissolution of familiar social distinctions by which he had once oriented his life. Now the reader discovers the great shock to the bourgeois, the peril he feels in the once familiar streets of his own city. There is neither security within the city nor freedom from fear outside it. His sense of comfortable space, as well as his sense of hierarchy, has been destroyed. The formlessness of his society consequent to the unmasking of the instability of its values has found a spatial correlative. His present world is, therefore, a wreck of shattered perspectives. His categories of orderliness and precedence have been totally ruptured. His complacency in a world filled with landmarks is now replaced by the vertigo of nothing; the vacuum resides in his absolute surprise before the hollowness of everything he had previously assumed to be successful and safe.

Yet the bourgeois is incapable of understanding the bitter irony of all this. All that is left to him is the spiteful wish that his own sense of chaos may now be transferred elsewhere so that the distant enemy will also suffer this same shock of dislocation. His final word, his curse on Edom and Uz (vss. 21-22), implies that willful indulgence in moral anarchy functions as the universal cause of inevitable material ruin in any society. His ultimate resolution thus comprises neither insight nor resignation, but merely an ineffectual tantrum of vindictiveness. He thus falls short of the reporter's final empathy and compassion. After he has observed the chaos and experienced the confusion, his reaction is the wish that the evil be spread out even further.

The voice of ch. 5 of Lamentations is a choral voice. It is made up of the people of Jerusalem as a community, out of a shared misery and a common purposive atttitude towards God. The chorus is not simply the reporter, the city, the veteran, and the bourgeois speaking together; the chorus has its own character, subsuming each individual *persona* in an act of prayer which transcends the viewpoints and the inadequacies which the poet perceived and expressed through the first four chapters.

The first four chapters enjoy a certain unity in that they share significant underlying perspectives, a unique spiritual orientation towards the experiences they convey. They share a narrative constant in the passers-by who jeer at Jerusalem, who resemble the reporter without achieving his compassion, who mock the veteran as scapegoat and victim, who may include the bourgeois whose

wonderment at the downfall of the city does not preclude an element of cynical satisfaction. The heckling laughter of those who walk by without emotional involvement echoes through the chapters as a counterpoint to the appeals for pity, the prayers, the curses of the suffering. The passers-by act as a pivot of recognition on which the reader can swing from the passionate outcries to the detached observations as on a fixed moment in time. The reader can recognize that the subjective examination of one *persona* has been simultaneous with the objective description by another by the sound of mockery from the passers-by.

The first chapters also share the thematic constant of the hungry children. Jerusalem as the desolate woman represents the continuum of past guilt into present degradation, but the destruction of the children testifies to the impossibility of a future. In the present misery, the children are not only starving, they are even being sold so that their parents may buy food and ultimately they are being consumed by their own mothers. The poet sees that the cannibalism is wiping out the final vestige of instinctive human love as the nation consumes the vehicles and creators of its future. The present moment of anguish is thus the absolute pause between a corrupt and irrecoverable past and an unimaginable future.

The first chapters, as already noted, share an acrostic structuring in their poetic formulation. The final chapter, however, has no such acrostic pattern. The inevitable conclusion intended by the alphabetical sequence is inconceivable in the final moment of the book. No new sequence of events or emotions has been initiated. There has been, after all, no real progression in the course of the book: shock, fatigue, despair, disorientation have reached in the fifth chapter a declaration of the communal awareness of Jerusalem's total destruction.

The chorus addresses its prayer to God to express its need for relief, not to express any firm hope in prompt deliverance. The fund of torments has simply been exhausted; there remains no possible suffering which has not already been inflicted and endured. Now the people have seen the nothingness underlying the life which had separated them from God. They grope their way towards him as towards the only plausible explanation of their human finitude and the only possible source of relief from their anguish.

The chorus voices its sense of imprisonment within the present bankruptcy of the people whom God has abandoned. The community is left in a vacuum, with nothing as strong as hope or confidence or trust. It retains only conviction, the conviction that God will finally lift his punishing hand from his people. Quantity rather than quality is now the issue. No longer need anyone ask, "Should Jerusalem suffer?" Admittedly she must, and does. The question is, "How long shall Jerusalem continue to suffer?" The chorus ends its prayer, suspended without a definite answer.

The only answer to the mystery of God's relationship to his people is provided, not by a sixth *persona* speaking for the Name, but in the community's conviction that accompanies and supports the implicit litotes: our God is not unrelenting.