

Vice: New and Selected Poems

by Ai

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Reviewed By Jeanette Lee

Ai (pronounced "I"), winner of the National Book Award for Poetry in 1999, is a dramatic monologist who has appropriated this type of writing from Robert Browning and now excels at it. Her dramatic monologues are uncompromisingly raw and disturb the reader's imagination out of the reader's comfort zone. This is rendered even more effective and personal through her trademark first person narration. Her poetry has been criticized for being violent and rife with sex. However, violence and sex do not make appearances for the sake of titillation but are necessary parts of the stories her characters tell about their lives in contemporary society. Sadly, if Ai's dramatic monologues are violent and beset with sex, it is because ours is a violent and sex-obsessed society.

Fascinatingly and ironically, Ai does not write about herself; she is not even overtly present in her own work. However her scorching honesty always subtly calls forth the poet to the reader's mind. Her dramatic monologues are dominated with characters that are eager to tell their stories in their own words about their experiences. This poet has a pronounced proclivity towards giving voice to characters that are normally silenced and marginalized in contemporary society. There are minorities, women, convicts and all types of socially "othered" peopled.

An excellent example is "Go", a poem from *Fate* (1991). The dead young Mary Jo Kopechne addresses her affair with Senator Edward Kennedy, its demise with her death and society's reaction. The most chilling aspect of this poem is how Ai has exhumed Mary Jo's voice and given it the temporal space in print and psychological legroom in the reader's mind to narrate to us the events surrounding her death. What Ai attempts successfully is to reverse the ownership of the story so that Mary Jo is not only able to say what happened to her but to respond to the Kennedy family, the media and society in general. It is the request that Ai masterfully writes Mary Jo asking in "Go":

"Why doesn't someone write the monologue
that will finally explain this melodrama
and let me claim it?"

This is not only a poem that seeks to explore a well known story from a different point of view but the language is beautifully imagistic, which can be seen as early as the opening sentence:

Once upon a Massachusetts midnight
under a sky smoothed of light
as if wiped by flannel,
a car sailed off a bridge
but did not float.

Throughout the poem, Ai continues with references from the Bible, Roman Catholicism, Greek mythology, Politics, and Jazz. Such is the range and poetic mastery of Ai, that she is able to reference her work with such disparate elements and all in the language of the everyday. Much of her poetry is written in this manner. It can be deemed necessary since Ai writes from the perspective of the first person.

Despite Ai's actual non-presence in her poetry, her poems are infused with the voice of presence. Her characters are fully present in their tales. This can be seen in "The Good Shepherd: Atlanta 1981" from *Sin* (1986). This poem is based on the Boston serial killer, whose victims were all young African American men. In the poem, the killer narrates another killing and at the end the killer identifies himself as God. This

association brings forth many sociological and historical questions about African-Americans, religion and race in America.

In *Greed* (1993), we read "Penis Envy", where a soldier comes home from the Gulf War to a wife who has left him for another man. Due to the history of the poem's title, at a first glance the traditional association with Freud and women may initially prompt this type of recognition. However, Ai in her characteristic manner appropriates terms and rewrites their meanings with ease. As the reader progresses through the poem there are references to Clarence Thomas, Anita Hill and Othello. This poem moves beyond its opening setting to explore bigger social issues concerning the tenuous ground that can be male sexuality and a soldier's psychological state after having participated in a war. Many of the other poems in *Greed* develop in a similar manner. They evolve from the personal context of the speaker to envelop huge sociological concerns to return to the particular problems or challenges under consideration by the speaker.

There is always this constant movement that challenges the reader to question prevailing and traditionally accepted concepts not only about themselves but more importantly those related to other people. Among the selection of new poems, there is one titled Rwanda. In this dramatic monologue, Ai writes of the civil war that has devastated this country from the perspective of a young girl. In so doing, this war, which is in another country on another continent becomes more real and unsettling.

Perhaps Ai's most endearing quality is her complete lack of a polemical voice. This is a poet who writes about necrophilia, incest, rape and murder without condemning what and who has been severely criticized. However, by presenting these characters telling their stories, Ai demands that the reader moves beyond censure and into the realm of understanding the socio-historical and economic conditions that may have engendered such behavior.

Vice is a compilation of works from previously published *Cruelty* (1973), *Killing Floor* (1979), *Sin* (1986), *Fate* (1991) and *Greed* (1993) and also includes a selection of new poems. This is a must read for all students of literature and burgeoning poets. To witness the combination of her flexibility and wealth of historical and contemporary knowledge is not only a written performance par excellence but also a learning experience.