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The three voices of contemporary poetry

by [Charles Martin](#)

On the survival & well-being of the three voices of contemporary poetry as proposed by T. S. Eliot.

We think of ourselves as *having* voices, but these days our poets *are* voices. That is to say, the word "voice" has come to be synonymous with the word "poet" in all of those venues in which we discuss poetry, ranging from critical essays and reviews to the blurbs on the backs of the poets' books. If I had entitled my essay "New Voices in American Poetry," you would have expected to read about some new young poets, emerging, even as nations do, from the backdrop of their obscurity. A recent blurb describes such a recently emerged poet as one of the "best new voices in American poetry." This identification of poetry with voice is in fact so much of a commonplace as to be largely unnoticeable to us and something that we do not object to when we do notice it.

Despite the ubiquity of the usage, it was not always so: John Dryden and Alexander Pope did not speak of a poet's "voice," but of his "thought," and in his "Essay ...

Charles Martin's most recent book of poems is *Starting from Sleep* (Overlook).

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