



**The Voice**  
**Norman H. Pritchard**  
**from The Matrix Poems: 1960-1970**

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**Sphinx (1986)**  
**Anne Garreta**  
**Translated by Emma Ramadan**

That evening, without a glance at the audience, I steered myself toward a table tucked to the side where I always insisted on sitting, and where A\*\*\* was waiting for me. The proclamations that I had debated nonstop en route crystallised unexpectedly at the sight of A\*\*\*, and I abruptly broached the subject close to my heart, as if to get it out of the way. A declaration of love is always tedious; it exceeded my patience to dilute the exasperation of my passion in a detailed statement, to represent discursively the unbearable confusion of my immediate desire—tolerating neither delay nor explanation, so much did its urgency torment me. My intentions were clear; my speech only muddled and veiled them in incoherence. I was alternating aimlessly between snippets of narration, the minutes of my interior monologue, syllogisms and images, passing without transition from slang to high style and from the trivial to the abstract without ever finding the right tone or genre in which to deliver my words. A\*\*\* was taken aback by this unprecedented bout of garrulous, confused violence.

A\*\*\*'s response to the declaration I proved incapable of making was, however, perfectly clear. It could be summarised with a simple verdict: "You must not love me"—an attempt to claim that A\*\*\* was unworthy of my passion and that it would damage our friendship. A\*\*\*'s propensity had always been to refrain from passionate attachments of the flesh, attachments that, once broken by misfortune, betrayal, or accident, resulted in prejudicial excess of sadness. Consequently, A\*\*\* thought it wise to disavow the idea of amorous possession, which could do nothing but exacerbate my confusion and forbid us from returning thereafter to that honest friendship, that guarantee of stability, to which we would be better off confining ourselves. That response, the arguments used to justify A\*\*\*'s refusal, were attempts to disorient me; in fact they did nothing but accentuate the imperative violence of my desire. They also left room for debate. All of the notions of love A\*\*\*'s reasoning invoked seemed erroneous to me, and I set about proving it. Those reasons were only a pretext; I wanted the truth. I was ranting, using cunning to obtain

it, and seeing that the facts were being concealed from me, I brazenly concluded that they must have been in my favour. We spent the night discussing, disputing the erroneous fables used to justify A\*\*\*'s refusal, and the valid reasons for my desire. Through every tone I modulated the absolute demand and legitimacy of my passion.

In return, A\*\*\* took refuge behind a moderation far from the habitual impulsiveness to which I was accustomed. That night the inversion was complete: I made myself into a demon, and A\*\*\* symmetrically put on the mask of the angel that I had abandoned. A\*\*\*'s final argument, pronounced on the threshold of the Eden, was of this order: "I rely on your friendship, and a physical relationship would annihilate it irremediably; so you must not love me, for such a relationship would be hellish. Don't ask of me what I am unable to give you without the risk of letting you down." I relate neither the exact terms of this plea—they were much more trivial—nor the precise progression of A\*\*\*'s personal logic, which was much less clearly defined. And I cannot relate them simply because A\*\*\* never formulated a link between successive sentences. From an unorganised mass of statements, of partial notes and arguments, I managed to extract a line of reasoning, a collection of synthetic propositions that I subsequently reiterated to verify their accuracy. For example, the following statements, made more than an hour apart: "If I agree to sleep with you, things won't be the same afterward;" and, "I'm ill-tempered, no one tolerates me for long;" and, "We can't sleep together, we'll end up fighting because neither one of us will want to let the other take the lead." I concluded implicitly that A\*\*\*, only able to imagine love as a system of power relations, could only envisage our relationship as a battle, leading irremediably to a violent rupture. I had to translate and arrange every word so that they became intelligible to me. Add to this some misunderstandings stemming from different mother tongues, and perhaps one can grasp the difficulty of my enterprise.

This resistance, despite being hard to define, did not disarm me: I persevered and I kept at it for weeks, trying to prove to A\*\*\* through every means imaginable that to succumb to my pleas and do the deed, far from destroying our affection, would only deepen and reinforce it. I insisted, tactically, on this shocking fact: A\*\*\*'s not-so prudish attitude could coexist with my moral rigidity, and a carefree practice of bodily exhibition could rub shoulders with an equally strong contempt and suspicion of the flesh. In other words, that A\*\*\*'s excesses could go hand in hand with my moderation and decorum. Far

from being enraged by my obstinacy or taking offence at my incessant urging, A\*\*\* found it all quite amusing. This was a good sign. Certainly the variety of my pleas was astonishing; one finds oneself suddenly capable of deploying the treasures of rhetoric, imagination, and persuasion in order to convince someone to have sex—a very common ambition, and not so interesting when one thinks about it in the cold light of day. But voilà, the price that I seemed to attach to my conquest, measured in terms of the energy and ingenuity I was expending, was high enough to be flattering. What must have at first seemed like a blaze of concupiscence was, over time, taking on real form.

Our daily telephone conversation were no longer anything but a game: a hypothetical reconstruction of our relationship if A\*\*\* were to succumb to my desires. We were presenting each other with illusions, visions, and tableaux. The object of this display was to figure out how to get along without drama, how to deal with the overcrowding engendered by a relationship that we hoped would not be temporary, but rather truly invested with stable affections, tastes, habits, and lifestyles—all of which differed radically, even more each day. We discussed everything down to the most trivial details. Would we live together? And if so, how would we divide up the household chores? Would we sleep in separate beds, thus shielding ourselves from the boredom of a complacent conjugality? And if not, what type of bedding would we choose? A\*\*\* was pushing for the classic pairing of sheets and covers, I for the more rational duvet.

The slow workings of this fiction, which didn't shy away from ridiculous or insignificant detail, were taking on the meticulous traits of familiarity. I was winning A\*\*\* over to the possibility of such a relationship. Its incongruity, its danger was dissipating in the soothing quietude of our constructed fable. Repetition and habit tend to diffuse excess. A\*\*\* was no longer systematically imagining the worst, no longer predicting disasters at every turn; the scenarios were becoming less catastrophic. Our union, by dint of simulation, was no longer inconceivable. The game of "and if" wore down A\*\*\*'s reluctance; every day, we already belonged to each other in our imaginations. My desire was gaining power through a trick, was gaining life through a fiction.