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Who goes there? Examining persona in poetry

Are you housed in me or not? The tenant
or the landlord of my skin?
‘The New Self’ by Steve Guerke

‘I am large…I contain multitudes’ wrote Walt Whitman in *Leaves of Grass*
(Whitman, 1986, 85). Look at any anthology or collection of poetry, and they likewise contain multitudes: of characters, personae, and speakers.

Carol Ann Duffy creates the identities of ‘Queen Kong’ and ‘Mrs Midas’ in *The World’s Wife*. Tina Chang writes as the Empress Dowager of China (*Of Gods & Strangers*). The wildflowers and rivers of the British Isles ‘speak’ through Alice Oswald (*Weeds & Wildflowers, Dart, A Sleepwalk on the Severn*). In *Akhenaten*, Dorothy Porter resurrects the charismatic Pharaoh who ended pantheism in Egypt by insisting only the Sun God be worshipped. Thousands more poets offer dramatic monologues from mythological figures such as Demeter, Persephone, and Orpheus; and they inhabit the skins of anorexic women (Frank Bidart’s ‘Ellen West’) and sperm whales (Simon Armitage’s ‘The Christening’). It is not just a contemporary phenomenon: a favourite persona poem of mine is ‘Ulysses’, by Alfred Lord Tennyson (1809–1892), in which the old king entreats his followers to leave retirement and accompany him on one last heroic voyage. Indeed, as American poet

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1 From *Poetry Magazine* (July/August 2012)
Jeannine Hall Gailey argues, as long as the dramatic monologue has been in existence, so has persona poetry.²

What is ‘persona’ in poetry? Why do so many poets use proxies through whom to channel their poems, and what effect does this have on the writing? Who is really in control of the poem: the poet, or the persona? Who is the tenant, who the landlord?

In a letter to his daughter Frieda, an aspiring writer, British poet Ted Hughes gave some advice about writing. ‘The emotions of a real situation are shy, but if they can find a mask they are shameless exhibitionists. So—look for the right masks’ he wrote (Hughes, 2007, 678). He was trying to encourage Frieda to approach her writing from an oblique angle, to avoid writing directly of the incident or experience concerned, and instead to cede authority to an alternative voice. His suggestion has resonance for poets: that if we set aside responsibility for the poem (our sense of ownership, authorship) then we may access, on a deeper and more intimate level, whatever impulse is working up through our unconscious. Through dissembling, through pretence (as Shakespeare understood well, and exploited in his plays) emerge the most powerful truths, and often the most memorable writing.

Every poem presents an opportunity for a poet to assume a mask, another persona. From the relative safety of the disguise of another self, a poetic character, an ‘author’ other than the real author, the poet can make revelations that ordinarily would stay hidden. The poem articulates a different, and perhaps more daring, rhetoric. In another letter, to an associate, Hughes specifically noted (was he being

² ‘If we allow that dramatic monologues are very similar to persona poems and consider that dramatic monologues have been around a very long time, then one could say that the persona poem has been around at least as long as the ancient Greek poetical dramatic works, and of course, more recently, popularized by Shakespeare.’ From ‘Why we wear masks: Three Contemporary Women Writers and Their Use of the Persona Poem’ by Jeannine Hall Gailey.
ironic, considering the way he begins this observation?): ‘Speaking for myself, I have always found (in retrospect usually) that adopting another persona is in fact an immense liberation for me’ (Hughes, 2007, 628).

Persona is a handy circuit breaker. When discussing and critiquing poetry, one quickly learns to distance the poet from the material. One talks about the ‘I’ of the poem, or the ‘speaker’, avoids placing the writer directly within the context of the work. In effect, the poet becomes subordinate to the poem. One is careful (mostly) to do this even with the work of so-called ‘confessional’ poets such as Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath, or Robert Lowell, where the content is often attributed to explicit biographical detail.

In his classic meditation ‘The Death of the Author’ French philosopher Roland Barthes insisted the writer is incidental to the relationship between the reader and the text, and that ‘the true locus of writing is reading’ (Barthes, 1967). Paying too much attention to the culture of the ‘author’, he argued, inhibits the reader as much as it distorts and limits the writing. Too much sifting over a poem’s embers in search of a poet-phoenix risks stripping the work of metaphysical meaning, and by consequence scour it of any significance apart from its relationship to the author’s private life. The poem is thus reduced to the status of a referent ‘this was written because he/she was depressed/suicidal/having an affair’, effectively limiting the reader’s capacity to appreciate the work. Biography smothers art. Poems become footnotes to the text of a turbulent life, perhaps not quite as their authors intended. It is an interesting theory. Some readers might argue that knowledge of a writer’s biographical situation heightens the response to the work: how can confessional poetry be called ‘confessional’ otherwise? Persona poetry demonstrates a more natural alignment with Barthes’s argument: by channelling a separate identity, a deliberately different
authorial voice, distance is already built into the work; and the poet/author stands behind a mask of his or her own making.

In the context of persona poetry, Barthes’s idea of the nullification of the author is, I believe, highly relevant. From a writer’s point of view, I would argue his theory can be applied just as usefully to poetry while it is being written as when it is being read, and here persona is the key. The use of persona enables the poet to ‘get out of the way’ of the writing, to forget about censorship, received methods of speech and behaviour. It is a powerful way of dramatising the poem; it allows the poet to dare a different experience, gender, culture, and moral code. It is also a way of varying the vocabulary and register of the poem. Poetry is fictive, the work of imagination. It seeks fresh ways of telling old stories, of evoking paracosms: alternative, imaginary universes. Because it deals with ‘frontiers of consciousness beyond which words fail, though meanings still exist’ (Eliot, 1953, 55), poetry has to use every means at its disposal to translate emotion and affect into language. Persona is an important tool in the poet’s toolkit. Yet it is not only about presenting the voice through which a poem may speak to the reader. Channelling a persona is also a way for the poet to find out what the poem is really about; it can open up routes to more startling truths.

Personae surface in a variety of ways. There are persona poems where the poet adopts wholesale the identity of another, and writes as that person. For example, British poet Wendy Cope’s alter-ego is Jason Strugnell of Tulse Hill (an nondescript suburb of south London). “Jason’s” poetic hallmark is his inability to resist imitating the style of famous poets—Eliot, Wordsworth, Hughes—with hilarious results. Fernando Pessoa famously established several counterparts, each with distinctive biographies and writing styles.

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3 With ‘The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock’, Eliot created perhaps one of the most famous persona poems of the twentieth century.
There are poems that make use of archetype or myth (and I have already mentioned characters such as Demeter and Persephone). The challenge for the poet is to make them new, to tell a familiar story in a surprising way. This approach has proved a rich source of inspiration, particularly for female writers of the late twentieth century. For nearly every myth that has traditionally objectified women, there is a feminist revision where the female character is recast as protagonist as opposed to victim/tragic heroine. The late fiction writer Angela Carter did this with many memorable stories such as ‘The Company of Wolves’. Think also of the Lazarus story being turned into a manifesto of vengeance (Sylvia Plath’s ‘Lady Lazarus’).

Then there are persona poems that do not draw directly from archetypes, but put imaginary characters in a dramatic setting. For fun, while drafting this essay, I conducted an audit of personae I have used over the past two years. This is a selection: I have been the Little Mermaid, an owl, a hospital patient, female lover of a married woman, childless viticulturist, psychoanalyst wife of a comic strip superhero, bereaved spouse, a fish. I have been a queen bee, a male teenage mass murderer, a guy determined to lose himself (literally and figuratively) in the outback of Australia, a dying nineteenth century gold prospector writing a letter to his already dead wife, and an insomniac Minotaur-slayer/matador. Even when there has been little distance between the ‘I’ of the poem, and the ‘I’ who has written it, a persona has still guided the way.

For a recent poem, I took a cue from Scottish poet Liz Lochhead’s powerful re-imagining of Mary Shelley’s dream, said to be the source of Shelley’s famous novel Frankenstein. In ‘Dreaming Frankenstein’, Lochhead writes of Shelley in the third person, as if the speaker of the poem is reporting the story of the dream. She also

4 And increasingly, cinematic treatments in the twenty-first century, e.g. Universal Pictures’ Snow White & the Huntsman
uses this approach to narrative voice, I suspect, to emphasise the juxtaposition and opposition of gender. This is the opening stanza:

She said she
woke up with him in
her head, in her bed.
Her mother-tongue clung to her mouth’s roof
in terror, dumbing her, and he came with a name
that was none of her making

(Lochhead in Herbert, 2010, 32)

As a response to this idea, I tried my own re-imagining of a different author and character. I chose Emily Brontë and Heathcliff, and attempted to assume the personae of both, while writing of them both in third person. Because I have no record of how the reclusive daughter of a country parson came to create one of the most disturbing characters in literature, (and in such an outburst of a novel), I used Brontë’s rumoured anorexia, along with Cathy’s passionate declaration ‘I am Heathcliff!’ (Brontë, n.d, 92) to suggest that Heathcliff embodied the very sustenance Brontë allegedly denied herself. The more I inhabited the world of the poem, the more I was convinced that the metaphor of covert eating and fasting was the right key to these personae. Heathcliff and Cathy have an all-consuming love. Heathcliff pays the sexton to let him jump into the mouth of Cathy’s grave, and knock out one side of her coffin, so that in decomposition his body will mingle with hers, and the earth can digest them together. Towards the end of *Wuthering Heights*, he stops eating and effectively starves to death. Emily herself dies of a disease popularly known as ‘consumption’, a name that seems a supreme irony, though of course, it is she who is consumed by the illness. The surrounding moorland, both backdrop to all this drama
and wet-nurse of Emily’s imagination, seems like a huge digestive system of ravenous mist and sucking bog.

My discovery was that despite writing in third person (implying distance), I felt the experience of bringing the poem into being as viscerally as if I had been using the first or second person (I often use the second person to suggest a collective ‘we’). Persona need not be channelled through the ‘I’ voice of the dramatic monologue, but may be mediated through the ‘he’ and ‘she’ of the third. Sometimes first person is just too powerful, it blows the fuse of the poem. Again, as in Lochhead’s poem, I felt the interplay of the male and female personal pronouns was vital to the poem’s symbolism. This is the first couple of stanzas of my draft of ‘Metabolising Heathcliff’:

She hoards him; cures him in the scullery of her soul, she feels

him flesh her,
rise like dough beneath her skin

As a reader, one is invited to set aside the person who wrote the poem and listen instead to the persona who narrates the poem. I have already suggested that I think it is also crucial for the person who ‘wrote’ the poem to do this too. The manner in which the persona behaves, speaks, and sees the world is akin to a map being laid for the poet, upon which he or she traces the energy of the poem: its vocabulary, structure, rhythm and content. And yet for the poet it is not just about ‘following’, it is also about ‘feeling’ the persona. It is as though this is a character one knows very well and yet not at all; as if one is homesick for a place where one has never been, and
only the poem can make this strangeness more familiar. It strikes me that this shift, this friction between known and unknown is what I am reaching for in ‘Metabolising Heathcliff’. This poem is not only about a specific author creating a specific character, it also attempts to speak to the wholesale invasion of the poet’s creative space by an imaginary or fictional being\(^5\): the necessary process (as I see it) for writing in persona, or indeed any type of poetry. Poems introduce the poet to the many selves of the unconscious, collective and individual.

Which leads me to the next conundrum. Is the poet the mouthpiece for the persona, or is the persona the mouthpiece of the poet? Sometimes I feel it is the former rather than the latter, and for that I am grateful, because then I believe I am writing not only what I want, but also what I need. At the risk of romanticising the act of creativity, it is not an exaggeration to say that I often feel the personae in my poetry are choosing me: they are externalisations of some interior intelligence (unknown to me) that wishes to be expressed. I have found evidence that this is true for others who are far more experienced than I. The eminent Australian poet, Les Murray, who wrote a verse novel *Fredy Neptune* about a modern-day ‘Odysseus of the Outback’ (Padel, 1999) remarked ‘Fredy Neptune appeared and said ‘write me’ … (W)hen I got to the ending he just walked away and never bothered me again, so I thought it must have been right’ (Murray in Wroe, 2010). When Dorothy Porter’s *Akhenaten*, (an absolute rocket of a verse novel narrated in first person) was re-issued, Porter wrote ‘I finished writing this book seven years ago and thought I’d finished with Akhenaten … (L)ike his enemies, I underestimated his lingering, obstinate charm. He’s back’ (Porter, 1998).

\(^5\) Even if personae are based on real people, they are fictionalised within the poem.
We hold many selves within ourselves, and perhaps the most important is what psychoanalyst Carl Gustav Jung described as “shadow”: ‘the invisible saurian tail that man still drags behind him’ (Jung, 1939). Literally, it is the dark side of our psyche, where the less desirable but maybe more authentic aspects of our personalities thrive. Writing in persona, listening to the voices that speak up during the process of writing is a way of walking alongside one’s shadow. Gailey probes this psychological factor in relation to persona poetry:

Writing persona poems might allow a writer to fully voice an emotion they might be repressing, such as anger or sadness, without feeling they are personally vulnerable. They can express opinions without fear of reprisal, since, after all, the writer isn’t presenting their own opinions, merely those of a created character. This can result in an artistic embrace of the “shadow” self, as well as an exploration of the anima/animus of the writer (Gailey, 2008).

Up to a certain point, I agree with this, but I feel there is yet more to unpack, and that is the existential paradox at the heart of poetry: the inseparability of persona and poet, and of person (self) and poet. Every poem, (and here I would include even the most direct and confessional poems, to a degree), is written through masks of varying thickness and complexity. In poems where the veil is thin, the person remains hidden, while the “poet” is fore-grounded. It is a somewhat more self-conscious art (I am thinking here of Anne Sexton’s work, poems like ‘Her Kind’ and ‘For My Lover’). With persona poetry, the “poet” recedes behind the mask, but conversely, perhaps more of the person is allowed to emerge.

What does this mean for the reader? Nothing—and everything. Nothing, because unless readers are forensically combing the writing for clues to the writer’s
psyche, and tying it back to biography, they may overlook personal revelation. But when the poet uses persona it can make a lot of difference to the energy and truth of the writing, and thus to the experience of the reader. The poet is less likely to censor the persona, and hence the self. As the great writer E B White observed ‘all writing is communication; creative writing is communication through revelation—it is the Self escaping into the open. No writer long remains incognito’ (Strunk and White, 2000, 67).

By way of conclusion, I want to focus briefly on an extraordinary poem I came across recently, called ‘The Fish’, by Sri Lankan-born, Mumbai-based poet Amali Rodrigo. She writes from the point of view of a foetus, conceived through rape, whose parents are forced to marry. Masked within the mother’s belly, the foetus describes how the mother fixates on the husband/father/attacker’s feet, which are ‘smooth / as de-scaled fish’ (Rodrigo, 2012) and unbearably smelly. The mother endures it until three days before her baby’s birth, when she takes action, using the axe ‘for cracking coconuts’ to get rid of the source of the smell. The horror is all the more shocking in the delicacy of its handling, its mediation through the innocent savant eyes of the narrator. In this poem, with great skill, Rodrigo illustrates how versatile, how powerful persona can be in creating narrative and atmosphere. From one of the most intimate viewpoints of all, a child within a mother, a true “silent witness”, she subverts the idea of intimacy, shows its perversion as much as its purity.

With persona, there is no sensibility the poet cannot aspire to represent; no space the poet cannot attempt to fill.
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