Contemporary American Poetry and Expression of the Self

An Honors Thesis (ID 499)

by

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Muncie, Indiana

May 1984

Spring 1984
Part I
Contemporary Poetry and the Self
Any art form, whether it be music, literature, or painting is a form of expression. For some reason the artist often feels a need, if not a driving force, to express the self through his craft. Expressing the self is perhaps the most personal man can ever be on earth because he is trying to become "aware of his existence as a distinct part of the world." He is, through expression, holding up this existence, essentially standing naked, to the world for scrutiny. This is a phenomena as old as man. For example, in the 6th Century B.C., Sappho wrote, "I confess/I love that/Which caresses/Me."2

The expression of the self is often most evident in poetry—especially contemporary American poetry. In contemporary American poetry, the subject of the poem and the poet are often one and the same. These poems are not necessarily working towards "assuring a distance between the poet and subject, the poet and his poem," as was often done in the past.3

What is it, then, that drives these poets to become so very personal? In his book, The Confessional Poets, Robert Phillips suggests that personal poetry is "a means of killing the beast within us."4 In other words, it is form of therapy.

A. Poulin Jr. offers a more substantial explanation:

Personal poetry occurs as a result of the exploration of and response to the most inner reaches of the poet's self below the rational and conscious levels. Poems grow out of images discovered in the depths of human darkness: they are spoken by the voice of that most profound silence in a man.5
By reading the works of many poets, but especially the contemporary American poets, I have been inspired to find the voice of my "profound silence" and express the mysterious self which makes me what I am. Perhaps the contemporary American poets inspire me most because I am an American living in a rapidly changing world, in a time of progress but also a time of fear, a time in which man can destroy himself at the push of a button which launches a missile. The contemporary poetry of the Americans reflects this fear and insecurity. If at times it screams and is self-indulgent, it is done with justification. But for myself, I do not wish to "howl" like Ginsberg, I wish to tread quietly, precisely, and if need be, painfully down the path of discovery and expression of my self. Three poets in particular have inspired me to pursue this journey in such a manner. Those poets are Sylvia Plath, Denise Levertov, and Robert Creeley.

What I admire in Sylvia Plath is not so much her subject matter as the way she presents it, "She prefers...to make you hear what she sees, the texture of her language affording a kind of analogue for the experience she presents." Her experiences are for the most part dark, suicidal, and very stark. It is almost painful to read them. This is evident in her poem, "Daddy." To read this poem silently is quite different from reading it aloud. When read aloud, the pain and bitterness expressed in the subject matter are brought to life largely because it is so physically difficult to read. For example, the end of the fifth and beginning of the sixth stanza reads:

I never could talk to you.
The tongue stuck in my jaw.
It stuck in a barb wire snare.
Ich, ich, ich, ich,
I could hardly speak. 7

Sometimes though, Plath relieves this intensity of her work through the use of humor. A poem which exemplifies this, as well as her extraordinary use of alliteration and assonance is her poem, "Mushrooms:"

Overnight, very
Whitely, discreetly,
Very quietly

Our toes, our noses
Take hold on the loam,
Acquire the air.

Nobody sees us,
Stops us, betrays us;
The small grains make room.

Soft fists insist on
Heaving the needles,
The leafy bedding,

Even the paving.
Our hammers, our rams,
Earless and eyeless,

Perfectly voiceless,
Widen the crannies,
Shoulder through holes. We

Diet on water,
On crumbs of shadow,
Bland-mannered, asking

Little or nothing.
So many of us!
So many of us!

We are shelves, we are
Tables, we are meek,
We are edible,

Nudgers and shovers
In spite of ourselves.
Our kind multiplies:

We shall by morning
Inherit the earth.
Our foot's in the door. 8

This poem appeals to me not only because of it's precise and
simple language, but because of the feeling of quiet persistence that pervades the entire poem. I do not perceive it as simply a statement about the meek inheriting the earth. I see it in an almost frightening light. The mushrooms seem to represent rapidly multiplying feelings of fear and insecurity which cannot be controlled and may overtake the world or individual at any time.

In a less severe light, there is another poet who has had a significant impact on my writing. That poet is Denise Levertov. Levertov's poetry is "frequently a tour through the familiar and the mundane until their unfamiliarity and otherworldliness suddenly strikes," and she "convinces us of her genuine rapport with the reality she presents at its core." Her expression of the self and of the world around her is so clean, and so pure that it is almost religious. The first poem I ever read by Levertov had such a "religious" feeling about it and has definitely been influential in determining that certain quality I wish my poetry to possess. The poem is "The Breathing:"

An absolute patience.
Trees stand
up to their knees in fog. The fog slowly flows uphill.
White cobwebs, the grass leaning where deer have looked for apples.
The woods from brook to where the top of the hill looks over the fog, send up not one bird.
So absolute, it is no other than happiness itself, a breathing too quiet to hear.
"The Breathing" depicts a place and a moment in time so "absolute" and so pure that it is probably something experienced only once or twice in a lifetime and Levertov captures this beautifully.

Another poem by Levertov which has affected my thoughts about writing is "Something to Wear." It is a poem about thinking and about discovering the self or some truth about the world and our part in it. The major metaphor of the poem is the process of knitting. The winding and unwinding of yarn is like the thought process itself. As Levertov states in the first stanza, if we only had the ability, like a cat, to sit all day and think our thoughts through, then perhaps we might make some sense out of the madness of the world:

To sit and sit like the cat
and think my thoughts through—
that might be a deep pleasure:

to learn what news
persistence might discover,
and like a woman knitting
make something from the
skein unwinding, unwinding,
something I could wear

or something you could wear
when at length I rose to meet you
outside the quiet sitting room

(the room of thinking and knitting
the room of cats and women)
among the clamor of
cars and people,
the stars drumming and poems
leaping from shattered windows

Another poet, Robert Creeley, has given me direction in my own thoughts about writing. Creeley seems to be totally immersed in writing exclusively about his own experiences, no matter how insignificant they might seem. What intrigues
me about this is Creeley's preciseness in relating these experiences. He explains the reasoning behind this in his preface to *For Love*, "There is no more to live than what there is, to live. I want the poem as close to this fact as I can bring it." While I do not necessarily agree with this reasoning, it is a true expression of the self, a baring of what is important in a certain and individual soul.

Perhaps Creeley's greatest influence on my writing is the structure of his poems. His structure is one of irregularly broken lines—a form which adds a tremendous amount of emotion to a poem. As Creeley himself said, "the poems come from a context that was difficult to live in, and so I wanted the line used to register that kind of problem...now the truncated line, or the short, seemingly broken line...comes from the somewhat broken emotions involved." An example of this is his poem, "The Rain:"

All night the sound had come back again, and again falls this quiet, persistent rain.

What am I to myself that must be remembered, insisted upon so often? Is it that never the ease, even the hardness, of rain falling will have for me something other than this, something not so insistent—am I to be locked in this final uneasiness.

Love, if you love me, lie next to me. Be for me, like rain, the getting out of the tiredness, the fatuousness, the semi-lust of intentional indifference. Be wet with a decent happiness.
Another poem of Creeley's which is indicative of the influence he has had on my writing is "The Pattern." This poem also makes extensive use of the irregularly broken line to emphasize emotion, but it also is a poem about thinking and the self:

As soon as
I speak, I
speaks. It
wants to
be free but
impassive lies
in the direction
if its
words. Let
x equal x, x
also
equals x. I
speak to
hear myself
speak? I
had not thought
that some­
thing had such
undone. It
was an idea
of mine.15

"The Pattern" is important to me because it expresses something that I have often felt. There are really two "I's" in a person, one that does speak and one that speaks but is not heard. Poetry is one way of freeing the impassive "I" of which Robert Creeley speaks. It is also a means of exorcising pain and anger as in Sylvia Plath's poetry, and it is a way of expressing reality in ethereal light as does Denise Levertov.

All of these poets, in addition to many more, have given me the inspiration and the direction to pursue my own creative
outlet—my poetry. It is an attempt to express the part of myself which I cannot do in everyday living and interaction with the world around me. Good or bad, my poems come from my soul; they are me.
Part II

My Self
Indifferent Ducks

Around the round pond
In Kensington Gardens
Wood and canvas chairs
Hold old men
Moored fast to life
By habit
Awaiting the return
Of model ships
They set upon the water which
Forever ripples
In concentric circles
Supporting indifferent ducks.
The Sitting

My eyes,
Smooth, hard, cold
Empty lumps —
Straight from some face
Of an ancient ruin,
Reflect nothing.
You, master sculptor,
Dulled them.

I may as well been of stone
the way I sat
Afraid to move
Amidst all the chipping and scraping
Your chisel-happy hand did
To create
To create
To create
An image of me that was not
But I believed...

I am of stone
Roughly hewn
Unfinished.
But your absence brings
One
Gasping
Breath of relief.
I crack.
I wait.
Your artistry,
Master sculptor,
Will disentigrate.
A Private Collection

I go to this,
This gallery.
It is cool and quiet,
Hushed.
The walls
Breathe
Silent sighing breaths.
I have seen
The paintings
Move,
Climb from their hooks,
Follow me
Furtively.
They are haunting
Sometimes cruel,
They soul whisper
Revealing me.
But this
Gallery
Is my secret
No one I know
Knows.
It is hard to find
And often
Locked.
A Once Brilliant Idea

In a sudden
Halt
Of wind
The cotton string
Sagged
For a moment
Just
A moment
But the kite
Spiraled
Downward
Dragging it's tail
Dropping
Out of the sky
Into the trees
Waving
Their arms,
Awaiting
The arrival of
The kite.

It died
A savage
Death.
First Communion

White veiled, stockinged
Gloved and laced,
The bride,
A child of eight!
Knelt before the
Green robed, gold embroidered
Man forever
Chanting the gobbledygook

"In Nomine Patris, et Filii, et Spiritus Sancti..."

He, resting one hand on her head
Pressed, with the other,
A flat tasteless disc onto her tongue.

It stuck fast to her mouth's roof
Like glue.
Notes


2Ibid. P. 3


5Poulin. p. 389


12Howard. p. 93.

13Ibid. p. 89.


15Ibid. p. 45.
Bibliography


