

Contemporary American Poetry and Expression of the Self

An Honors Thesis (ID 499)

by

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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."<sup>1</sup> 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."<sup>2</sup>

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.<sup>3</sup>

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."<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup>

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."<sup>6</sup> 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.<sup>7</sup>

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.<sup>8</sup>

This poem appeals to me not only because of its 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."<sup>9</sup> 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.<sup>10</sup>

"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.<sup>11</sup>

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."<sup>12</sup> 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."<sup>13</sup> 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.<sup>14</sup>

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.<sup>15</sup>

"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 disintegrate.

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

<sup>1</sup>Robert Phillips. The Confessional Poets. (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press), 1972, p. 2.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid. P. 3

<sup>3</sup>A. Poulin Jr. Contemporary American Poetry. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company), 1971, p. 388.

<sup>4</sup>Phillips. p. 2.

<sup>5</sup>Poulin. p. 389

<sup>6</sup>Richard Howard. Alone with America, Essays on the Art of Poetry in the United States Since 1950. (New York: Atheneum), 1980, p. 483.

<sup>7</sup>Poulin. pp. 287-290.

<sup>8</sup>Sylvia Plath. The Colossus & Other Poems. (New York: Random House, Vintage Books), 1968, pp. 37-38.

<sup>9</sup>Ralph J. Mills Jr. Contemporary American Poetry. (New York: Random House), 1966, p.177

<sup>10</sup>Carol Marshall. Twentieth Century Poetry. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company), 1971, pp. 68-69.

<sup>11</sup>Mills. p. 186.

<sup>12</sup>Howard. p. 93.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid. p. 89.

<sup>14</sup>Robert Creeley. Selected Poems. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons), 1976, p.30.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid. p. 45.

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