

During my attendance at The Jackson Hole Writers' Conference in Jackson, Wyoming, during the month of June 2018, I picked up many good techniques involved in the creation of writing a good poem. One of the workshops was led by poet Bethany Hurst and focused on the concept of using a persona in poetry. So, first, let's start off by explaining what a persona is. The writer of the poem, or the poet, is not always the same person who is narrating a poem. Poets often create personas to deliver the message of the poem with all of the nuances they intend, which cannot be delivered just by the voice of "the poet." Who is narrating the poem? Is it a man or a woman? Is the speaker twenty years old? Eighty years old? Is the speaker someone we all know such as Abraham Lincoln? Does the speaker convey certain attitudes in the poem? Does he fear growing older? Is she afraid of snakes? Does she love someone? Does she understand everything about the narrative she is giving or does she just have partial knowledge? Is she to be believed? Is he insane or untrustworthy? All of the nuances that you can think of relating to a character in a story may also apply to a poem's persona.

Bethany Hurst gave a brief definition of the persona poem as a poem "narrated from a determined vantage." Also: "often thought of as a mask or character who is obviously separate from the poet." Again, the person may be an actual cultural or historical or literary figure. It may be a constructed character as in Eliot's "Prufrock." It may be a real person who is not historically famous. It may also be one version of the poet's identity.

And to add another angle: persona poetry "often tacks between performance and authenticity, between concealment and illumination." Persona poetry may reveal some things,

without giving other things away. This, to me, is what makes persona poetry interesting. How much do we really know about the speaker? What is she telling us and not telling us?

Not all poets have been inclined to persona poetry. Galway Kinnell criticized “the persona poem as too disposable: you can use it to investigate darker aspects of the self/humanity, but then can jettison it too easily as a construct” (Hurst). As Hurst continues, “In this way, persona gets at the heart of lyric poetry’s paradox: [it] ‘often discloses hidden/private aspects of self but does so in highly shaped and mediated ways...that bear the stamp of artifice.’”

Romantics, or poets from the Romantic Age of poetry, believed that poets “were speaking the truth in propria persona.” However Modernists “challenged that notion by intentionally cultivating persona. New Critics pounced on the notion of persona to ‘block inquiry into the poet’s expressive intention.’” Hurst continues: “Obligation to treat poetic speakers as personae carries over into postmodernity in ever more extreme forms.” So we have some ages embracing the notion of persona while other ages are shunning it.

There is that conflict between lyric poetry, giving us the pure voice of the poet, and the poetry of the constructed persona. Sharon Cameron writes that “the voice of the lyric poet [is] inherently ‘choral,’ since it takes place outside of linear (narrative) time and can thus synthesize multiple temporalities into a single utterance.” Lyric poetry “slips through a side entrance, maybe it tunnels into the basement, maybe it parachutes onto the roof and slides down the chimney. Perhaps the lyric doesn’t enter, just presses its face against a window and longingly observes” (Cameron). The lyric seems to know no bounds, it can be expressed in a multiplicity

of ways, it may reach the reader through any way of a million paths. There is a certain freedom in the lyric. It is not defined by one developed "persona." The mind of the poet may go in any direction throughout the poem, not dependent upon remaining true to a character. So the persona poem must sacrifice something. It must sacrifice total freedom. But, it may also enrich the poem by getting us truly into the mind of a person. Truly into thoughts, beliefs, emotions, attitudes.

An exercise that Hurst gave us was to create a persona poem, to create it based on a real figure, and to have that person speak to another real figure. I chose to use Henry David Thoreau, author of *Walden*, as my persona. I chose to have his friend Ralph Waldo Emerson, the great essayist, as the person he addresses:

Thoreau

As I sit at my table the mice

My friends

Come and eat my bread

I hear at sunset the hooting of

The owls and I know they are

Lost spirits

Emerson do you know how valuable

It is to till a patch of ground

To hoe the beans

And see the sun rise every day

Above the pines

For we have talked much of

The value of this earth

I must tell you that I have

Always wanted to get away

To go to the lake and see

What is beneath the surface

The sun out here is always

Warm on my hand

But winter too has a welcome

Spot in my yard

In it are too beginnings

Part also of the exercise was to have the persona reveal something about himself in the poem. Getting at what makes up the persona. Getting at truly what they think and believe. This is the richness of the persona poem. This is how poems are created that get into the mind of a

person. In sum, all of the workshops and lectures I attended were useful, but this one will carry over into my teaching of poetry at Lincoln.