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PARADOX AND AUTHENTICITY IN THE CONFESSIONAL STYLE: THE SELF AS PERSONA

The persona, or "mask," is usually considered a speaker of the poem who is different from the poet. This is traditionally seen in opposition to the confessional mode, which is personal, and intends on revealing the speaker's feelings.

Richard Hugo, however, working from a lyric/confessional stance directly related to Whitman, which both confronted and reshaped who the poet must be in the poem, says of the mask:

> Every poem a poet writes is a slight advance of self and a slight modification of the mask, the one you want to be. Poem after poem the self grows more worthy of the mask, the mask comes closer to fitting the face. After enough poems, you are nearly the one you want to be, and the one you want to be closely resembles you.

The implication here, is, of course, that one is never completely satisfied with the self as given, and so must transform that inadequate self by surrendering to the poem's aesthetics, therefore achieving artistic transcendence. This is the primary impetus of Richard Hugo's poetry.

It is also a force that compels this poet to incorporate various experiences and environments into aspects of self. What I am suggesting is that for some poets, such as Richard Hugo, use of the persona is a means to render authenticity to the confessional style, to infuse it with emotional honesty by transcending the limitations of the personal.

In his book, Style and Authenticity, Jonathan Holden says:

> The authority of the confessional voice finds its source in the authenticity of the speaker's testimony, which must satisfy two paradoxical requirements: it must provide sufficient journalistic detail so as to render a vivid historical sense of the speaker's past experiences, simultaneously, however, it must transcend the narrowly personal, so that the speaker's story acquires, like a saint's life, a mythic, rather than a merely journalistic significance.

I wish to explore this paradox, as it is embodied in the work of Richard Hugo. I'll also be discussing Robert Lowell, in terms of explicating feeling through persona. Both these poets achieve an emotional honesty which empowers their work with intimacy and transcendence. More than mere devices, the well-developed strategies they employ coincide with W.H. Auden's notion of becoming someone else for the duration of the poem.

Although Hugo and Lowell share a concern with the direct confrontation of personal failure, Hugo moves toward self-acceptance and redemption, while

Robert Lowell's poems, as Mark Doty points out in an essay published in A Profile of Twentieth-Century American Poetry, " . . . do not document psychological crises so much as enact or embody them . . . " This embodiment, in Lowell's case, seems to leave him unable to redeem the self, yet he ironically transcends it. He is a poet of conflict and opposition, but, like Richard Hugo, Lowell too explores the realistic and mythological self, through the persona.

In an essay from The Situation of Poetry, Robert Pinsky places the confessional mode within the context of a tradition:

> Recent years have shown an increasing turn away from the verbal complexity and elaborate "wit" associated with Eliot and some of the poets he admired; the same discernible tendency has also meant a drift away from the more bardic, declamatory qualities of Black Mountain, San Francisco, other counter-Eliot writing of the fifties. In both cases, the new direction, cooler and quieter, suggests the paradoxical, essential historically recurring poetic aim of sincerity. Yet in the work of some well-known poets acknowledged as especially effective in the pursuit of personal feeling, intimate utterance, plain or "basic" material — say, John Berryman, Robert Lowell, Theodore Roethke — one can demonstrate, with only a little special choice of evidence, a shared, various tradition that might seem by definition "insincere" the so-called "mask" or "persona . . . "

Richard Hugo's definition of that mask could easily be applied to the poems of Robert Lowell, particularly in Life Studies and For the

Union Dead. It is not the confessions themselves that hold significance. It is the style of the poet serving as his own persona, and the variations of diction and syntax that provide authenticity and ultimate authority of voice.

In terms of their self-deprecation and wit, the poems of Richard Hugo are remniscent of Lowell, as in that poet's "Waking in the Blue":

> The night attendant, a B.U. sophmore,
> rouses from the mare's-nest of his drowsy head
> propped on "The Meaning of Meaning."
> He catwalks down our corridor.
> Azure day
> makes my agonized blue window bleaker.
> Crows maunder on the petrified fairway.
> Absence! My heart grows tense
> as though a harpoon were sparring for the kill.
> (This is the house for the "mentally ill.")
>
> What use is my sense of humor?
> I grin at Stanley, now sunk in his sixties,
> once a Harvard all-American fullback,
> (if such were possible!)
> still hoarding the build of a boy in his twenties,
> as he soaks, a ramrod
> with the muscle of a seal
> in his long tub,
> vaguely urinous from the Victorian plumbing.
>
> A kingly granite profile in a crimson golf-cap,
> worn all day, all night,
> he thinks only of his figure,
> of slimming on sherbert and ginger ale —
> more cut off from words than a seal.

This is the way day breaks in Bodwitch Hall at McLean's;
the hooded night lights bring out "Bobbie,"
Porcellian '29,
a replica of Louis XVI
without the wig —
redolent and roly-poly as a sperm whale,
as he swashbuckles about in his birthday suit
and horses at chairs.

These victorious figures of bravado ossified young.

In between the limits of day,
hours and hours go by under the crew haircuts
and slightly too little nonsensical bachelor twinkle
of the Roman Catholic attendants.
(There are no Mayflower
screwballs in the Catholic Church.)

After a hearty New England breakfast,
I weigh two hundred pounds
this morning. Cock of the walk,
I strut in my turtle-necked French sailor's jersey
before the metal shaving mirrors,
and see the shaky future grow familiar
in the pinched, indigenous faces
of these thoroughbred mental cases,
twice my age and half my weight.
We are all old timers,
each of us holds a locked razor.

Here Lowell, himself a mental patient in a psychiatric hospital, brilliantly distances himself through use of persona, yet remains vulnerable in a true confessional sense. The poem moves from the first stanza detailing the speaker's situation, then leaps to the wonderfully imagistic "Crows maunder on the petrified fairway./Absence! My heart grows tense/ as though a harpoon were sparring for the kill./(This is the house for the 'mentally ill.'). That final line creates the perfect transition

between the speaker's unsettled state of mind and the situation of being an observer, a voice which is at once empathic and satirical. Satire builds in its intensity, until we return to the speaker's personal feelings, as when he declares "There are no Mayflower/screwballs in the Catholic Church."

In the concluding paragraph, we see the speaker in a moment of vanity and pride: "Cock of the walk,/I strut in my turtle-necked French sailor's jersey/before the metal shaving mirrors . . ." And now we have the striking line where the speaker confronts, literally and figuratively, his human vulnerability: ". . . and see the shaky future grow familiar . . ." The startling image evoked by the last two lines of the poem transcends the personal, yet brings the speaker to terms with it.

Repeatedly in his poems, Robert Lowell's images trace a route of transcendence. Often, when they are confronting the most out of control situations, the poet will turn to image, form, and rhyme, with extraordinarily powerful effect. "Fall 1961" is an example of this:

> Back and forth, back and forth
> goes the tock, tock, tock
> of the orange, bland, ambassadorial
> face of the moon
> on the grandfather's clock.
>
> All autumn, the chafe and jar
> of nuclear war;
> we have talked our extinction to death.
> I swim like a minnow
> behind my studio window.

Our end drifts nearer,
the moon lifts,
radiant with terror.
The state
is a diver under a glass bell.

A father's no shield
for his child.
We are like a lot of wild
spiders crying together,
but without tears.

Nature holds up a mirror.
One swallow makes a summer.
It's easy to tick
off the minutes,
but the clockhands stick.

Back and forth!
Back and forth, back and forth —
my one point of rest
is the orange and black
oriole's swinging nest!

It is in such imagistic movements of Robert Lowell's poems that we discover the essential, human location of their authenticity. This is also where we find transformation and surprise through language. As Mark Doty suggests:

> . . . His achievment, in the creation of the self as the speaker of the poems, is to make us believe in the authority and actuality of the voice while artfully constructing the poem as dramatic monologue, rife with metonymy and metaphoric detail. The results of Lowell's careful creation of the self as persona are harrowing, not least because the poems refuse resolution. They may point to the cause of the smouldering losses of the present, but they offer no resolution, no possible outcome.

In contrast, Richard Hugo's poems move from despair to recovery and redemption. We repeatedly see themes of degradation, rejection, and a continual struggle with acceptance. We see him cultivating opposite sides of his personality, as a ratification for ways of looking at the self. Hugo's poetry is a verification of his existence within the context of the world around him, and it is this embodiment that allows him to explore his inner self without sentimentality.

Permeated with Jungian concepts of death and rebirth, his work locates and identifies the psychic implications of a given place, and in the process discovers the human, the vulnerable. This, in turn, becomes the region of transcendence. "Montana Ranch Abandoned," Hugo's first Montana poem, is an example of his fusion of psyche and landscape, as a means of expressing internal feelings through embodiment:

> Cracks in eight log buildings, counting sheds
> and outhouse, widen and a ghost peeks out.
> Nothing, tree or mountain, weakens wind
> coming for the throat. Even wind must work
> when land gets old. The rotting wagon tongue
> makes fun of girls who begged to go to town.
> Even brakerods dance in the dirt.
>
> Alternatives were madness or a calloused moon.
> Wood they carved the plowblade from
> turned stone as nameless gray. Indifferent flies
> left dung intact. One boy had to leave
> when horses pounded night, and miles away
> a neighbor's daughter puked. Mother's cry
> to dinner changed to caw in later years.

> Maybe raiding bears or eelworms made them quit,
> or daddy died, or when they planted wheat
> dead Flatheads killed the plant. That stove
> without a grate can't warm the ghost.
> Tools would still be good if cleaned, but mortar
> flakes and log walls sag. Even as you shored,
> cars would still boom by beyond the fence, no glance
> from drivers as you till the lunar dust.

A reader certainly wouldn't know much about the specifics of the poet's life from this poem, but the emotional impact of its stark loneliness, despair, and futility is extraordinarily powerful. Abandoned by his father, and left in the care of stoic Lutheran grandparents by his mother, Hugo developed, in loneliness (as any child in his situation might) a heightened awareness and imagination, coupled with a sense of worthlessness, or as he himself would put it, of being "the wrong thing in a right world."

This sense of isolation naturally created the need to identify himself in the world, but since events in his life already told him he was inadequate, he had to find other selves to momentarily inhabit. For Hugo, the resulting reinvention of self was not a way out of the world, but a way in to join an alienated world that would accept him, a world he could ultimately accept or oppose. Again, this is in contrast to Robert Lowell, whose persona explicated that poet's oppositional, satiric stance toward the world.

Richard Hugo's alienation drove him to a persona he could accept, a persona with his own personal myth. Hugo was in psychotherapy for many

years, and his frequently anthologized poem, "Degrees of Gray in Phillipsburg," from The Lady in Kicking Horse Reservoir, is an excellent example of how that experience impacted on his writing. Here Hugo confronts his sense of failure and loss, and transcends it. In "Degrees of Gray in Phillipsburg," his lyrical power brings him out of despair, to a startling moment of self-actualization:

> You might come here Sunday on a whim.
> Say your life broke down. The last good kiss
> you had was years ago. You walk these streets
> laid out by the insane, past hotels
> that didn't last, bars that did, the tortured cry
> of local drivers to accelerate their lives.
> Only churches are kept up. The jail
> turned 70 this year. The only prisoner
> is always in, not knowing what he's done.
>
> The principal supporting business now
> is rage. Hatred of the various grays
> the mountain sends, hatred of the mill.
> The Silver Bill repeal, the best liked girls
> who leave each year for Butte. One good
> restaurant and bars can't wipe the boredom out.
> The 1907 boom, eight going silver mines,
> a dance floor built on springs —
> all memory resolves itself in gaze,
> in panoramic green you know the cattle eat
> or two stacks high above the town,
> two dead kilns, the huge mill in collapse
> for fifty years that won't fall finally down.
>
> Isn't this your life? That ancient kiss
> still burning out your eyes? Isn't this defeat
> so accurate, the church bell simply seems
> a pure announcement: ring and no one comes?

Don't empty houses ring? Are magnesium
and scorn sufficient to support a town,
not just Phillipsburg, but towns
of towering blondes, good jazz and booze
the world will never let you have
until the town you came from dies inside?

Say no to yourself. The old man, twenty
when the jail was built, still laughs
although his lips collapse. Someday soon,
he says, I'll go to sleep and not wake up.
You tell him no. You're talking to yourself.
The car that brought you here still runs.
The money you buy lunch with,
no matter where its mined, is silver
and the girl who serves your food
is slender and her red hair lights the wall.

This is a pivotal poem in Hugo's career. In "Degrees of Gray in Phillipsburg," he is beginning to free himself from a past wrought from feelings of worthlessness and loss. It is a cathartic event that probably surprised the poet as well as any reader who comes to this poem. The poem actually embodies the process of transcendence.

From the opening lines, which find the speaker emotionally broken and sexually inadequate, Hugo identifies with the hatred and collapse of the poem's desolate setting. But, by the third stanza, he asks "Isn't this your life?" Then, at the poem's closure, he declares "Say no to yourself." In reassuring himself that there is a way out, the car runs, he has money, and he is excited by the "girl" who serves him, he discovers self-validation.

In The Lady in Kicking Horse Reservoir, Hugo confronts his fears of loss, sexual deprivation, mortality, an alcoholic future, and what Jonathan Holden refers to as "the fundamental fact that lies beyond all Hugo's poems — "dispossession." Here Hugo seems at once to accept his fate, and refuses to acquiesce to it. He retaliates by making this dispossessed state the stuff of poetry, and paradoxically reaches some level of transcendence.

In the title poem from that book, Hugo dramatizes coming to terms with loneliness, sexual longings, and anxieties around being accepted in the world:

Not my hands but green across you now.
Green tons hold you down, and ten bass curve
teasing in your hair. Summer slime
will pile deep in your breast. Four months of ice
will keep you firm. I hope each spring
to find you tangled in those pads
pulled not quite loose by the spillway pour,
stars the dead reflection off your teeth.

Lie there lily still. The spillway's closed.
Two feet down most lakes are common gray.
This lake is dark from the black blue Mission range
climbing sky like music dying Indians once wailed.
On ocean beaches, mystery fish
are offered to the moon. Your jaws go blue.
Your hands start waving every wind.
Wave to the ocean where we crushed a mile of foam.

We still love there in thundering foam
and love. Whales fall in love with gulls
and tide reclaims the Dolly skeletons
gone with a blast of aching horns to China.
Landlocked in Montana here
the end is limited by light, the final note
will trail off at the farthest point we see,
already faded, lover, where you bloat.

All girls should be nicer. Arrows rain
above us in the Indian wind. My future
should be full of windy gems, my past
will stop this roaring in my dreams.
Sorry. Sorry. Sorry. But the arrows sing:
no way to float her up. The dead sink
from dead weight. The Mission range
turns this water black late afternoons.

One boy slapped the other. Hard.
The slapped boy talked until his dignity
dissolved, screamed a single "stop"
and went down sobbing in the company pond.
I swam for him all night. My only suit
got wet and factory hands went home.
No one cared the crowd disappeared.
Morning then: the cold music I had never heard.

Loners like work best on second shift.
No one liked our product and the factory closed.
Off south, the bison multiply so fast
a slaughter's mandatory every spring
and every spring the creeks get fat
and Kicking Horse fills up. My hope is vague.
The far blue of your bones in May
may be nourished by the snow.

The spillway's open and you spill out
into weather, lover down the bright canal
and mother, irrigating crops
dead Indians forgot to plant.
I'm sailing west with arrows to dissolving foam
where waves strand naked Dolly's.
Their eyes are white as oriental mountains
and their tongues are teasing oil from whales.

There is an important turn in the poem's second stanza, when the poet, clearly an emotional "coward" and pained by rejection, says "We still love there in thundering foam/and love . . ." Despite the futility

felt in the lines "All girls should be nicer," and the remorse of "Sorry. Sorry. Sorry," the speaker wants to believe in hope and the possibility of change.

It is this secular faith that brings him to the poem's concluding stanza, where "The spillway's open and you spill out/into weather, lover down the bright canal/and mother, irrigating crops . . ." In this manner Hugo is, within the poem, coping with the abandonment not only by the lover, but his mother as well, and trying to resolve his sense of inadequacy around relationships with all women. He is both "the slapped boy" and the "coward disappeared," now returning to redeem himself.

By the time of the publication of The Right Madness on Skye (1980), seven years after The Lady in Kicking Horse Reservoir, Hugo was happily married to the poet Ripley Schemm, had published What Thou Lovest Well Remains American (1975), which had been nominated for both the National Book Award and the Theodore Roethke Memorial Prize, had won a Guggenheim and been appointed editor of the Yale Younger Poets series.

The Right Madness on Skye reflects those changes in Hugo's life, and embodies an evolution from seemingly overwhelming personal failure toward an absolute insistence on survival. He had finally reached a point where "the one you want to be closely resembles you."

In Landscapes of the Self, Jonathan Holden offers considerable insight regarding Hugo's position with this book:

> The Right Madness on Skye is Hugo's answer to the question of whether his art could survive his own "rehabilitation" and, if so, on what terms. Viewed in relation to Hugo's earlier work, his solution is so logical as to seem almost predictable. His best poems had been spoken by a persona in a setting. The speaker — a fictionalized magnification of certain aspects of Hugo's personality — was on the fringe of society, and his speech consisted largely of description, rendering the mood and the history of landscapes each of which was a reflection of the poet's state of mind and therefore, by extension, a mask — a partial dramatization — of the author's self. It is hardly surprising, then, that The Right Madness features a persona touring different landscapes . . .

It is in these "different landscapes" that Richard Hugo, with poignant wisdom, exhibits an optimism new to his work. He is more accepting and tolerant of a world that took so long to accept him, and he is therefore more trusting of it. It is here that he replays many of his old obsessions and fears, transcends them, and is psychically healed.

The last stanza of the poem "Glenn Uig" contains, in its final sentence, what would become Hugo's epitaph two years later:

> Believe the couple who have finished their picnic
> and make wet love in the grass, the wise tiny creatures
> cheering them on. Believe in milestones, the day
> you left home forever and the cold way
> a world wouldn't let you come in. Believe you
> and I are that couple. Believe you and I sing tiny
> and wise and could if we had to eat stone and go on.

It's difficult to say where this new optimism would have led him, but if we were to track the landscape of poetry Richard Hugo left behind, we would come to some barren place where a lone figure stood, probably in the rain. He would be laughing and sobbing to himself, to us.

While Robert Lowell did not assume the mask of optimism, both he and Hugo confronted the self through use of the persona. In doing so, they have offered us the possibility of poetry as a means to momentarily sustain and significantly transform our human vulnerability.

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