

CREATING
ANOTHER
SELF

**VOICE IN MODERN AMERICAN
PERSONAL POETRY**
second edition

SAMUEL MAIO

Truman State University Press

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PREFACE

Creating Another Self examines the aesthetics of modern American personal poetry, this second edition expanding on the first with the addition of analyses of eight new poets: Robert Bly, whose highly imagistic personal poetry is shown to extend beyond individual concerns to communal ones, and seven mostly recent poets who have employed the personal voice in ways unintended and perhaps unforeseen by their immediate aesthetic forebears.

The poetry occupying the attention of this volume takes as its principal subject matter an exploration of the self—seemingly the poet’s own, but chapter 1 argues for distinguishing between the *poet* and the *speaker* of a poem. Such poetry utilizes structurally and thematically the metaphysical motif of self-inquiry leading to self-definition, self-investigation leading to self-discovery. In the concluding sentences of the first edition, written ten years ago, I reflected that the production of personal poetry appeared to be “significantly waning,” as indeed it had been since the 1980s, the passing of James Wright and the simultaneous emergence of schools antithetical to personal poetry (such as LANGUAGE poetry and the New Formalism) apparently signaling the end of its popular practice. But reports of its death were greatly exaggerated, as demonstrated by the formidable personal poets treated in chapter 6.

Elizabeth Bishop once complained in a letter to a friend that Robert Lowell had, at the same time, opened *and closed* the book on meaningful “confessional” poetry (a use of the term I roundly dispute in chapters 1 and 2) merely by virtue of his being landed gentry, a *Lowell* whose personal history was at once private and public, his famous ancestors’ experiences inseparable from those of our nation’s own. In essence, Bishop had declared the demise of personal poetry just as it began in the modern era; only Lowell, she suggested, could make it other than narcissistic

exercises, perhaps interesting because novel (and sometimes salacious), but finally only pointing back to itself and its primary audience of one.

Even as the novelty had grown tiresome due to excessive and continuous use, and the concept of personal poetry had seemed to exhaust itself by such means of self-absorption prophesied by Bishop, a diverse group of poets embraced its aesthetics to speak for and of a much larger community far exceeding the private limits of individual consciousness, and thereby invigorating the global aspirations for personal poetry. Bly used personal poetry in his early work to explore ways to reach our collective unconscious (in the Jungian sense) through the use of archetypal and cultural images, regarding the poet as “a relative of the shaman,” healing the psychic and emotional wounds of members of the tribe. In a similar vein, most of the poets treated in chapter 6 feel a principal obligation not exclusively to the self but to the specific ethnic tribe from which they descend. Less expressive of identity politics and self-assertion than bardic, these poets speak inclusively and representationally. Yusef Komunyakaa, for example, uses the personal voice to speak from his vantage point as an African American, yet this voice speaks on behalf of all his fellow soldiers in the Vietnam War.

This study, however, is concerned with method and technique of voice not with poets per se. That is, the poets discussed throughout the book were chosen because of their representative use of the aesthetics of personal poetry, assuredly not on the basis of their fame or ethnic heritage or gender. Nor should my selection of poets be construed as any assessment of their being the best our nation has offered since World War II—even though I think a number of them rightfully can be so counted, most notably Robert Lowell and John Berryman. But “cultural prophecy,” as the inestimable Harold Bloom observed before presenting a list of potentially enduring poets to conclude his divine *The Western Canon*, “is always a mug’s game.” So let us not venture there, but now turn instead to that which constitutes the aesthetic properties of voice in modern American personal poetry.

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