

*One*



## The Poet's Voice As Persona

*THE TITLE OF THIS STUDY* is an adaptation of a remark made by the poet Richard Hugo, who said about poetic voice: "Voice is usually something that grows out of stance. It has to do with how strong a person's urge is to reject the self and to create another self in its place." Voice, as T. S. Eliot defined it in his essay "The Three Voices of Poetry," is the method by which the poet speaks. The voice is the speaker of the poem, not necessarily the poet—as often wrongly assumed, especially with reference to the personal poetry such as I here address. As he continued with his interview with David Dillon, Hugo argued that a type of self-rejection was "necessary to write the poem. . . apparently it is up to a point," and that many theories regarding poetic composition, such as "Keats's informing and filling another body, Eliot's idea of escaping the personality, Valéry's idea of creating a superior self, Yeats's notion of the mask, Auden's idea of becoming someone else for the duration of the poem," have as their basis "an assumption that the self as found, as given, is inadequate and has to be rejected" (111). So too, I submit, did the generation of poets writing personal poetry in the wake of this mostly modernist aesthetic. As Hugo implied in terms of his own practice, each rejects the self in favor of a persona, the speaker of a poem. Both "personal poetry" and "persona" need clarifying in context of my application of them.

Personal poetry acts to reveal the poet's self as it is defined by the experience depicted in the poem. Alan Williamson has termed as "personal" that contemporary poetry which is principally informed by "images of the self—or of the nature and quality of subjective experience" (1). Although "subjective experience" serves as a useful phrase (in that it is sufficiently broad) to describe the representation of the poet's self in poetry, my thesis is that the poet creates a persona—one called "I" or by a proper noun—to act as the personal poet's speaker, and it is this speaker's self which is defined by the poem's "images of the self," and only to the extent they are depicted in the poem. Therefore the personal poet, consciously or not, substitutes for his or her literal, historical self a *literary* self as voice of the poem, one that is sincere but not altogether authentic.

Lionel Trilling delineated the "sincere" self of a poet, or that which is believable in presenting (as speaker) a subjective experience of the poet's life with veracity, from the "authentic" self, or that which resembles more accurately the literal self overthrown—regardless of a poet's intentions to the contrary—in the poem's composition. His thesis of *Sincerity and Authenticity* is, succinctly stated, that the poet revealing his or her private (literal) self publicly—by presenting this self in the poem—is authentic; the poet presenting a self that differs, however slightly, from the private self—which self John Berryman referred to as the one with a social security number—is sincere, but nonetheless only partially veracious in some instances.

The poet may want only to be authentic, as Ezra Pound desired of his *Personae* (1909) about which he said he tried to eliminate the "complete masks of the self in each poem." But the very nature of a poet's craft, having to select which aspect of one's authentic self could best conform to the dictates of art—symbolism, rhymes, "images of the self"—while functioning as poetic voice, precludes that aspiration. As Pound learned, at best "one gropes, one finds seeming verity," he admitted in his well-known "Vorticism" essay. That Pound settled on calling his book *Personae* indicates finally his understanding that a literal rendering of one's self without masks is restrained by the finite, linguistic system of a poem; no single poem or gathering of poems could represent all of his authentic self. Instead, each poem defines yet another mask of the poet: a persona necessarily adopted as voice. The most that a poetic groping at authenticity can achieve is a poet's finding "seeming verity," having discarded all other aspects of the literal self as irrelevant to the poem at hand. Remaining is a literary self, at once sincere even though a persona. Further, the concept of "representing" one's authentic self by the images presented in the poem would undermine Pound's intention. One only can recreate the authentic self by use of images—likenesses or similitudes, that is—of

that self. The Italian word *imago*, which Pound would have known, means something close to our "icon," a persona of self when used in the context of personal poetry.

The personal poet intending a sincere voice, conversely, discovers a part of his or her authentic self revealed by the creative process. R. P. Blackmur's defining persona in his "The Language of Silence" as "a translation of what we did not know that we knew ourselves: what we partly are" appropriately describes the sincere-intending poet's discovery. That the poet consciously chooses "I" in his or her aesthetic decision of a persona proposed to represent the sincere (public) self does not separate fully that poet's authentic self from the poem. The use of the persona "translates," unknowingly to the poet, the sincere into the partially authentic. Trilling's definition of sincerity encompasses the personal poet's betraying his or her authenticity when in fact using a sincere self as voice in that, he writes, sincerity is "a congruence between avowal and actual feeling" (2). The act of declaring one's autobiography through the medium of poetry and a persona-speaker necessitates our referring to a personal poet's voice as sincere, or public in Trilling's terms. But it is this act which also blends the poet's private and public selves. That an "I" persona is sincere does not exclude the revealing of authentic elements—facts, emotions—in the poem regardless of the poet's intentions to mask them by a deliberate use of persona. Therefore any personal poet ultimately engages a persona of the self, whether called "I" in a poem mostly based on autobiography as is Robert Lowell's in his "Life Studies" sequence, or called "Henry" as is Berryman's. That persona is the poem's voice.

The authentic self of the poet—the private self devoid of his or her conscious or unconscious literary persona—is of course a compilation of selves, as Pound learned and as Robert C. Elliott wrote in his book *The Literary Persona* while reviewing critics' difficulties in distinguishing poet from speaker:

In the first person grammatical category there are depths and perplexities of an endlessly alluring kind. How extraordinary it is that "I" somehow encompasses in a coherent way the thousand and one selves that constitute a "Self," and that the person whom one loves and the person one loathes also say "I."  
(30)

Our distinction between authentic and sincere is helpful here. The personal poet's sincere self can be seen as one, or part of one, of these many selves; it is the persona presented publicly as poetic voice and is confined to the poem exclusively. A poem's speaker is not wholly the poet and consequently cannot even represent the authentic self, the assemblage of selves.

This issue long has been moot, as Trilling's and Elliott's books recount. Yet concerning American personal poetry of the late 1950s through the following two decades, most critics often have disclaimed any meaningful separation of a poet from his or her speaker. My study addresses the speaker as persona in the personal poetry of this period, categorizing it into three modes of voice: the confessional, the persona, and the self-effacing. The poets I have chosen to represent these modes each rejected the authentic self and created another, sincere self in its place (to paraphrase Hugo), a self expressed as the persona-speaker of their personal poems. These poets are: Robert Lowell, James Wright, and Anne Sexton as reflective of the confessional mode; John Berryman, Weldon Kees, and Galway Kinnell of the persona; and Mark Strand, Charles Simic, and David Ignatow of the self-effacing. (Each mode will be defined at some length later in this chapter.)

My central argument regarding the voice as persona is predicated on my belief that a personal poem is distinguishable by its speaker and that all American personal poetry since the late 1950s has been written in one of the three modes I have identified. My discussions of the work of these poets will demonstrate personal poetry's widely varying styles and practices in presenting the sincere self as speaker. It will be important to regard always this speaker as sincere no matter how directly the experience may be brought to us, no matter how seemingly intimate or private the voice—even if a poem's subject derives entirely from the poet's autobiography, as it does in much of Lowell's, Sexton's, Wright's, and Berryman's work as we know. That readers may disregard consideration of the use of persona as speaker in poetry derived from autobiography is partially a result of this poetry's style of free verse, proselike diction, and other constructions—used to convey sincerity and thus verisimilitude. Robert Elliott makes note of this:

Sincerity... can mean many things, but in most definitions it clashes inevitably with ideas of the persona, whether employed functionally by the poet or analytically by the critic. Masks, irony, dissimulation, artifice—all associated with the persona—are suspect when sincerity holds sway. (32)

In suggesting that personal poets use a mode of voice to present a sincere self in their poetry, I differ from the almost universally held notion that those poets whom we now call "confessional" are so because of their uncovering of the authentic self when using the "I" speaker. From the earliest commentary to the latest, the distinction between the poet's "I" and the poet has been ignored. M. L. Rosenthal (who well may have been the first to use the label "confessional") wrote in his 1959 *Nation* review of *Life Studies* that "Lowell removes the mask. His speaker is unequivocally himself, and it is hard not to think of *Life Studies* as a

series of personal confidences, rather shameful, that one is honor-bound not to reveal" (154). Nearly a decade and a half later, in the first book-length study devoted solely to the confessional mode, Robert Phillips posited: "[A] true confessional poet places few barriers, if any, between his self and direct expression of that self, however painful that expression may prove" (8). And Diana Hume George in her 1987 book *Oedipus Anne*, writing about a decade and a half after Phillips's remarks, says that "Sexton had in her earlier collections included poems to and about her doctors (such as the superb 'You, Doctor Martin' and 'Said the Poet to the Analyst'). ..." (146)—which statements will prove not quite right by my discussions of those poems in the next chapter; that is, "she," the authentic self, the poet, does not address anyone by a poem. Similarly, I would amend Phillips's statement to read "a *sincere*, confessional poet" or poet of the confessional mode in my terms, for it seems he used "true" as Trilling's sense of "authentic."

Sexton corroborated—as did many personal poets in statements concerning their poetic composition—my understanding of sincerity in personal poems. She considered herself the only "real confessional poet," as W. D. Snodgrass remarked, and as she told Stanley Kunitz in a letter. Yet she once illustrated for an interviewer (William Packard) her knowledge that the private self is not fully identical to the poet's public self as the speaker of a poem which recounts an autobiographical experience: "I've heard psychiatrists say, 'See, you've forgiven your father. There it is in your poem.' But I haven't forgiven my father. I just wrote that I did" (46). More appropriate to personal poets—writing in any of the three modes of voice—is the characteristic Phillips applied to the genre known collectively by then as confessional: "It uses the self as a poetic symbol around which is woven a personal mythology" (17). It is a mythology selective of experiences both autobiographical and imaginary, as Phillips observes (but then continues to assume those poets' authenticity):

While a confessional poem is one which mythologizes the poet's personal life, it has its elements of fancy like any other. It does not constitute, certainly, a mere recitation of fact for fact's sake, nor should the "facts" recited be mistaken for literal truth. If they were, one would be positive that Anne Sexton had a brother killed in the war (she hadn't) and that Jerome Mazzaro has a twin sister who is a nun (equally untrue). (11)

Any personal poet assumes a voice—as Sexton and Mazzaro did—to present one's subjective experience focusing on self-exploration leading to self-definition. Personal poetry, then, is one of this created self, a poetry inclusive of that self's individual consciousness in relation to its subjective experience. The

self of the confessional mode, as will be shown in the next chapter, usually attempts personal definition by means of a direct relationship to experience, the persona self by filtering experience through a mask, or persona—and I use the term here in Blackmur's sense—as will be discussed in chapter 3, and the self-effacing by removing itself from the context of experience, as the work examined in the fourth chapter will explain.

Personal poetry in our time marked a movement away from the modernist doctrine of impersonality (sketched in part by Hugo) which informed the New Critical view, the poetry of which had been foremost just prior to the popularity of poetry about the self. The modes of voice used by these new, personal poets convinced readers of their sincerity—as demonstrated by Rosenthal's remarks. This poetry had a new look, too, and a change in technique—necessary to its purporting sincerity, as Robert C. Elliott observed—so readers assumed it had abandoned also any use of persona, or speaker, other than the poet's authentic self. This, as I mentioned, is a faulty perception of personal poetry. Each mode developed as a consequence, not denial, of the persona aesthetic used in this century since the time of Pound's *Personae*. These modes, therefore, will be viewed with particular regard to their practices of voice as they have developed in America since the late 1950s when the publications of Allen Ginsberg's *Howl* (1956) and Robert Lowell's *Life Studies* (1959), and the subsequent notice these books received, marked a significant change in the direction of poetry in this country. These books' two most distinctive features, which proved lasting influences on the majority of poetry to date, were a return to the open forms the modernists had made acceptable earlier in the century and the extensive use of autobiography for matters of content, a subject which had been obscured by the New Critical insistence on objectivism.

That is, one reason for the reappearance of personal poetry within the past several decades was that it evolved, partially, from a reaction to the theories of impersonality which were entrenched in the poetry of New Criticism, or any poetry of the 1940s and 1950s which intentionally eschewed the personal self—of which poetry Eliot and Auden were the reigning masters. Some New Critics wrote personal poetry, certainly, and not all poetry in the “post–New Critical era” has been personal. Yet generally, New Critical poetry presupposed a critical “orthodoxy,” as Donald Hall wrote, one which dictated “a poetry of symmetry, intellect, irony, and wit” (qtd. in *Cry of the Human* 3). Also it was one that had adopted Eliot's “Impersonal theory of poetry,” as he titled it in “Tradition and the Individual Talent” (from the 1920 *Sacred Wood* essays). But this formal (stanzaic, metered) New Critical poetry did not incorporate Eliot's, or Pound's, *vers libre* aesthetics, as

Robert Lowell told Frederick Seidel (long after Lowell had abandoned his commitment to the New Critical style): “I feel Eliot's less tied to form than a lot of people he's influenced, and there's a freedom of the twenties in his work that I find very sympathetic” (365). It was Eliot's notion of how the self should—that is, should not, or only in an impersonal way—function as a matter of content for poetry which served the interests of such New Critical poets as John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, Robert Penn Warren, and Cleanth Brooks—poets influential on the early work of Lowell, Berryman, and, later, Galway Kinnell and James Wright, to name but few.

Literary historians have made note of the nexus between Eliot and the New Critics, and how both differ from those writing personal poetry. James Breslin, in *From Modern to Contemporary*, has written of Eliot's impact on the poetry of the time of the New Critics:

...the effect of Eliot went far beyond the supplying of manifest content for the dreams of younger poets. His influence was not *so* much specifically literary, in conveying rhythm, image, or voice, but one associated with a specific set of attitudes and values, subtly defining the expectations of many readers and editors as well as writers of poetry; and his influence was transmitted most powerfully by the New Critics. When the postwar period was not calling itself “the age of anxiety,” it was calling itself (somewhat anxiously) “the age of criticism.” Poetry and fiction might be floundering, but criticism flourished. In fact, while the second generation of modern poets often struggled against a sense of unrealized potentialities, the second generation of modern critics emerged as astonishingly successful. (15)

In the opening chapter of his *Cry of the Human*, Ralph J. Mills made the distinction between personal poets and those of the New Critical generation based on the degree to which “the personal element” informs the poem:

...both terms [“personalelement” and “personality”] oppose the view handed down from Eliot and the New Criticism that poetry and the emotions it conveys are or should be, impersonal, and that an author's personality and life ought to be excluded from his writings. In many of their poems Eliot, Pound, Stevens, and others stress the poet's anonymity by employing fictional masks, invented speakers or *personae*, thus enforcing a division between writer and work. The original motive for such objectivity seems genuine enough: to rid poetry of biographical excesses and the residue of the Romantics' preoccupation with personality which had seduced attention from the true object of interest, the poem itself. ...[T]he emphasis on the poet as an impersonal or anonymous “medium” (actually, as various commentators

have shown, to permit deeper, unconscious sources to aid in shaping poetic imagery and speech) passed out of Eliot's essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent" to become an important factor of the modern critical atmosphere. Subsequently, the poem came to be considered a neutral object, a vessel filled with the feelings of nobody, what Louis Simpson names "the so-called 'well-made' poem that lends itself to the little knives and formaldehyde of a graduate school." (4-5)

The New Criticism, of which Breslin and Mills write, espoused that "a work of art is an object in itself," and some of the criteria of this "objective poem" theory were: the autonomy of every poem, verbal ingenuity and wit, sustained objectivity, complex strains of irony, and aesthetic distance. The revolt against such New Critical ideas of verse—including also regular meter counts and rhymed stanzas, allusions to literature or other arts, subjects of ideation and philosophy (but not of one's subjective experience, which resulted in the consideration of the poem as "a neutral object")—informed the basis of contemporary personal poetry and its voices. As has been suggested, this "revolution in poetic taste"—to borrow a phrase of Louis Simpson—manifests itself in a verse of marked contrast in subject and style to that of the New Critical poetry, but some remnants of the modernists' personae were retained. Let us consider first the matter of subject.

T. S. Eliot is the only poet mentioned by Hugo in his list of theorists (who claimed that self-rejection is the means of poetry) whom, however tenuously, we can call American. His nationality is of note since this is a study of American personal poetry resulting from the seeming break with Eliot's followers—seeming, that is to say, because personal poetry, that which is seen opposing Eliot's impersonality theory, is in actuality another form of self-rejection, or the making of another self in Hugo's terms. And yet discernible periods in American poetry, as history has proven, need not result from a decision to eschew necessarily a countryman's influential work, but more likely a British poet's work, like Auden's as soon will be mentioned. Still, since Eliot's were the theories which ultimately led to the distinguishing voices of personal poetry—in that personal poets began writing in opposition to these theories—it will be useful to review his "Impersonal theory of poetry." Eliot's best expression of this theory is found in "Tradition and the Individual Talent." The poet, he wrote, "must be aware that the mind of Europe—the mind of his own country—a mind which he learns in time to be much more important than his own private mind—is a mind which changes, and that this change is a development which abandons nothing *en route*, which does not superannate either Shakespeare, or Homer, or the rock drawing of the Magdalenian draughtsmen" (51). The collective mind of the country, then, takes

precedence over the individual mind of the poet. "What happens [to the poet] is a continual surrender of himself as he is at the moment to something which is more valuable. The progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality" (52-3). Eliot's conception of impersonality, which shows in his own work of this time, begins with an understanding of the "universal" mind as having precedence over the individual mind, the personal self. Near the end of the essay, Eliot summarized his thesis as follows:

Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality. But, of course, only those who have personality and emotions know what it means to want to escape from these things. (58)

In "Hamlet and his Problems," he instructed the poet in the method of evoking emotions while restraining the poem from becoming "a turning loose of emotion":

The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an "objective correlative"; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that *particular* emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked. (100)

Eliot was later to modify his idea of impersonality in poetry (as did Auden, who wrote personal poetry by the end of his career), claiming that a poet writing of "intense and personal experience is able to express a general truth," and he used Yeats's last poems as exemplary. Eliot said, in the first annual "Yeats Lecture" (delivered at the Abbey Theatre in 1940):

I have, in early essays, extolled what I called impersonality in art, and it may seem that, in giving as a reason for the superiority of Yeats's later work the greater expression of personality in it, I am contradicting myself. . . . [T]he truth of the matter is as follows. There are **two** forms of impersonality: that which is natural to the more skillful craftsman, and that which is more and more achieved by the maturing artist. The first is that of what I have called the "anthology piece," of a lyric by Lovelace or Suckling, or of Campion, a finer poet than either. The second impersonality is that of the poet who, out of intense and personal experience, is able to express a general truth; retaining all the particularity of his experience, to make of it a general symbol. And the strange thing is that Yeats, having been a good craftsman in the first kind, became a great poet in the second. It is not that he became a different man. . . .

But he had to wait for a later maturity to find expression of early experience.. . (1828)

But the poets of the New Critical school considered Eliot's first impression, or theory, more germane to their purpose. Perhaps they regarded Yeats, as did Eliot, as "unique," and that an expression of the personal—an expression of universal significance or "general symbol"—could be accomplished only by Yeats's genius. That those of the New Criticism believed most poetry of personal experience could not evoke a "general symbol" separated them from the next generation of poets who contended that any personal poetry, because it is naturally self-serving, speaks for the many, and they cited Whitman as their forefather, in both style and content, in this versification.

Yet these disciples of Whitman were few in the 1950s, and the American bard was very much out of favor with the literati of the time. The enormous popularity of the work of Auden, who had come to the United States, served to strengthen the New Critical dominance of the principal current in poetry. Louis Simpson writes of this in *A Revolution in Taste*:

As long as Auden set the fashion—and this he was able to do, for he was a brilliant literary journalist as well as poet—the stream of experiment that had begun with the Imagist poets, especially that kind of writing of which William Carlos Williams was the chief exponent, receded into the background. Auden ruled with wit and a knowledge of verse forms; in comparison, the American poets who looked to Williams, or to a poet thought to be even more rudimentary, Walt Whitman, appeared to be fumbling provincials—certainly not worth the attention of readers who had been trained by the New Criticism to look for shades of irony and multiple, ambiguous meanings. (xv–xvi)

W. D. Snodgrass, whose book of personal poetry in the confessional mode, *Heart's Needle*, appeared in 1959—the same year as *Life Studies*—has explained in his *In Radical Pursuit* that he began writing in this atmosphere of New Criticism, as described by Simpson, and that he patterned his early poems to the dicta of its theories:

...we had been taught to write a very difficult and very intellectual poem. We tried to achieve the obscure and dense texture of the French Symbolists.. .by using methods similar to those of the very intellectual and conscious poets of the English Renaissance, especially the Metaphysical poets. I need hardly say that this was a very strange combination. My first published poem started like this:

June, and the Tigerlily swam our hedge  
Like gold fish in the inmost sea's most green

Awakenings. Fondly, we gathered the bloom.  
Thus: Dis. In our inquisitive, close room  
The Lily parched and clenched to a fist  
Which could then neither fierce nor pure subsist.

Of course you recognize that this is a poem about the loss of religious faith? The Tigerlily is meant to stand for Christ, who, like Persephone, was gathered away into the underworld by a dark god, Dis or Pluto.... one critic said this poem had no intellectual content; he said he wouldn't demand a metaphysical conceit (which, of course, the poem *was*), but he would like to have it talk about something besides plain old flowers. I had so packed my poem with intellection that he thought it had none! (42–3)

And Sylvia Plath's initial experiences with poetry, as Simpson reports in *A Revolution in Taste*, were similar to that of Snodgrass. Simpson defines further the poetry affected by New Criticism, and explains the extent of its influence on such young poets as Plath, as well as on the "generation of readers" trained by its school. He wrote:

In her attempt to write about history and culture in the manner of Auden, Plath diverged from her best subject-experience and what to make of it—as far as she would ever go. She was not alone: the influence of Auden was strong in these years. Young poets tried to write like Auden about history, with irony and wit, using traditional forms.. .

This elegance was very much of the period. New Critics emphasized the qualities in verse that lent themselves to "explication." Irony and ambiguity were especially favored. If the poem didn't fit the tools they kept the tools and threw away the poem. Cleanth Brooks' and Robert Penn Warren's *Understanding Poetry*, from which a generation learned how to read, contained six poems by Donne and not a single poem by Whitman.

...it would be another ten years before Ginsberg made an impression and Olson had a following. The admired poets.. .stood for poetry written in traditional forms and in a language removed from actual speech. (100)

Auden and the New Critics went beyond the modernists' deflection of the personal; they seemed to replace it entirely with a formal poetry using rarely the subject of one's personal history.

Yet Ginsberg arrived with his notion that autobiography — that which “you tell your friends about yourself,” even—is the only proper subject for literature. Ginsberg said in an interview with *Paris Review*

So then—what happens if you make a distinction between what you tell your muse? The problem is to break down that distinction: when you approach the Muse to talk as frankly as you would talk with yourself or with your friends. So I began finding, in conversations with Burroughs and Kerouac and Gregory Corso, in conversations with people whom I knew well, whose souls I respected, that the things we were telling each other for real were totally different from what was already in literature. And that was Kerouac’s great discovery in *On the Road*. The kinds of things that he and Neal Cassady were talking about, he finally discovered were the subject matter for what he wanted to write down. That meant, at that minute, a complete revision of what literature was supposed to be, in his mind, and actually in the minds of the people that first read the book... It’s the ability to commit to writing, to *write*, the same way that you... are! (288)

It was the poets’ commitment to writing in a style which best suited their personal poetry (“to *write*, the same way that you... are!”) that led in part to the rejection of the “objective school” represented by New Critical poetry. “So it was,” writes Mills in *Cry of the Human*:

that Stanley Kunitz, Richard Eberhart, Theodore Roethke, John Berryman, Robert Lowell, Karl Shapiro, Randall Jarrell, and others who began to write in the 1930s... were freed as individuals from the demands created by literary movements to an energetic and single-minded concentration that brought, in due time, Roethke in *The Lost Son*, Lowell in *Life Studies*, Berryman in *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet* and *The Dream Songs*, and Shapiro in *The Bourgeois Poet*, for example, to the kind of poetic breakthrough James Dickey calls “The Second Birth”—an intense imaginative liberation, achieved at great personal cost, in which the poet, like a snake shedding his dead skin, frees himself of the weight of imposed styles and current critical criteria to come into the place of his own authentic speech. (3)

In 1958, Robert Bly was calling for a break with that tradition established by the New Critical thought of objectivism. In reference to the insistence on objectivity (as opposed to the more subjective personal self) in poetry, Bly wrote in his essay “Five Decades of Modern American Poetry”:

Why do so few poets write now of business experience, of despair, or the Second World War? One reason, I think, is that we write in the old tradition. and

it is impossible to write of these subjects in the old tradition. A new style is invented to deal with new subject matter, and if we continue to write in the old style, we will cut ourselves off from the most important experiences of our time. (38–9)

The books, besides *Howl* and *Life Studies*, which soon began appearing—and which could be added to Mills’s list—were Snodgrass’s *Heart’s Needle*, poems about the complications arising from the poet’s divorce, Bly’s *Silence in the Snowy Fields* (1962), which collected poems of his subjective experience he had written in the 1950s, Plath’s *Ariel* (1966), which showed clearly her change from an earlier style (informed by Auden’s influence) by revealing a personal verse mostly concerned with a suicidal protagonist, and many others—all poetry which took as its subjects the self, the concept of selfhood, personal experience, the individual’s relationship to his or her time in history. And most of it was written in the “new style” (that is, not really “new” or inventive, but not in the formal style of the New Critical school) since, as Phillips has remarked, “openness of language leads to openness of emotion” and of subjective experience—which brings us to personal poetry’s contrasting style to that of New Critical verse.

The decade between 1959 and 1969 culminated with the appearance of two major poetry anthologies: *Naked Poetry* and *The Contemporary American Poets*. Stephen Berg and Robert Mezey, in their *Naked Poetry* (1969), called attention to “open forms,” a term first introduced into the vocabulary of criticism in the foreword of that anthology. Although several smaller publications such as the first issue of the magazine *Fifties* (1958), edited by William Duffy and Bly, encouraged the poetic movement away from traditional prosody (“The editors of this magazine think that most of the poetry published in America today is too old-fashioned,” that issue’s epigraph read), *Naked Poetry* was the first anthology from a major commercial publisher to receive wide observation, and acceptance, from the literati. “Naked poetry,” as it was, had supplanted that of the more traditional verse forms as the main current of American poetry. Mezey and Berg remarked in introducing the book “We began with the firm conviction that the strongest and most alive poetry in America had abandoned or at least broken the grip of traditional meters and had set out, once again, into the ‘wilderness of unopened life.’” The “open form” was somewhat defined by Mezey and Berg as “poems [that] don’t rhyme (usually) and don’t move on feet of more or less equal duration (usually). That nondescription gropes toward the only technical principle they all have in common” (xi). *Naked Poetry* fairly represented verse in open form, which by 1969 had become the preponderate mode of writing poems, even though the

content varied widely between the poets. Following each selection of poems, the living poets included a statement regarding his or her philosophy of the practice of open form poetry, resembling in manner some types of modernist manifestoes, many of which acknowledged an allegiance to the modern masters—Pound, Williams, Stevens, Roethke—and ignoring, except in a disparaging context, Warren, Brooks, Tate, and Ransom.

Parallel in importance to *Naked Poetry*, *The Contemporary American Poets* (1969), edited by Mark Strand, proclaimed to reflect the “rebirth” of poetry in this country. Whereas *Naked Poetry*’s primary objective was to display recent poetry’s new look as differentiated from the adherence to forms common to the poetry written in the decade after World War II, Strand’s choices, although the same at times as Mezey’s and Berg’s, reflected his concern for subject matter. To that end, he took as his starting date 1940, which included some poetry written in the New Critical style. That is to say, his anthology did not espouse a polemic of poetic form as did *Naked Poetry*. Strand wrote in his preface:

Many of today’s poets have made, if not a cult, at least a lifetime’s work of the self, a self defined usually by circumstances that would tend to set it apart. In their energetic pursuit of an individual manner that would reflect a sense of self-definition, they have used what they wanted from various literary traditions. Helped on in recent years by the abundance of translations from almost every language, there are poets in the United States whose imaginative roots seem to have sprung from Neruda or Char or Cavafy or from Arthur Waley’s versions of Chinese poetry quite as much as they have from Emerson or Whitman. (xiii–xiv)

Strand’s remarks suggest that Bly’s directive had become common practice, that “a new style is invented to deal with new subject matter” and that the “new style” could, presumably, borrow from the old. His remarks also support my earlier comment concerning the influence of foreign poets on the direction of American verse.

Statements by Adrienne Rich and Louis Simpson serve to confirm Strand’s claim that some poets have made “a lifetime’s work of the self.” Rich has argued, in her essay “When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision”:

Until we can understand the assumptions in which we are drenched we cannot know ourselves. And this drive to self-knowledge, for women, is more than a search for identity: it is part of our refusal of the self-destructiveness of male-dominated society. A radical critique of literature, feminist in its impulse, would take the work first of all as a clue to how we live, how we have

been living, how we have been led to imagine ourselves, how our language has trapped as well as liberated us, how the very act of naming has been till now a male prerogative, and how we can begin to see and name—and therefore live—afresh. A change in the concept of sexual identity is essential if we are not going to see the old political order re-assert itself in every new revolution. We need to know the writing of the past, and know it differently than we have ever known it; not to pass on a tradition but to break its hold over us. (278–79)

Although she speaks of “we” in the foregoing passage, Rich’s personal “drive to self-knowledge” has brought her to the rejection of her authentic self and the projection in her poetry of her sincere, public self, as she told Stanley Plumly: “I am not interested in the poem as a way of revealing a self that I think I know about to the outer world. I am interested in, certainly, finding out more about that self, and I think of myself as using poetry as a chief means of self-exploration” (29–30). As Blackmur suggested, a persona voice can reveal about the self that which a poet “did not know she knew”; and—although Rich may disagree—she employs a persona as poetic voice (for this or other means) once she decides to write a personal poem.

Simpson speaks in a more general context than does Rich. His statement in *American Poets in 1976* included the following:

For some time American poets have been writing almost exclusively about their personal lives. . . . The present moment is everything—there is no sense of the past. Nor is there any sense of the community. If poetry is the language of a tribe, it seems there is no longer a tribe, only a number of individuals who are writing a personal diary or trying to “expand their consciousness.” (332)

The problem of self-definition had been the focus of the poetry written in the period covered in Strand’s anthology, and one solution, of course, was to write poems in a distinctive, individual manner, even if failing to represent an authentic self—one can learn about this self because of (not despite) the persona voice. That ambition, coupled with the subject of self, dictated which foreign poetry was to be translated—which further contributed to the influence of translations on American poets that Strand mentioned—and this in turn may have been responsible for poets’ loss of “any sense of the community,” as Simpson believes, in favor of an overwhelming obsession with their private experiences. Rich and Simpson, both writing in 1976, indicate how self-obsession had flourished since Strand’s remarks of 1969 to the point where American poets wrote “almost exclusively about

their personal lives," as Simpson complained. This level of saturation in contemporary poetry is due to the freedom open form allows and in part to the (over)reaction to New Critical objectivism. That these poets have "no sense of the past" is in deliberate disregard of Eliot's theory as stated in "Tradition and the Individual Talent." Yet my ensuing chapters will show that many personal poets could blend formal poetics, a sense of history, and the subjective self. The modes of voice give each the opportunity to retain some of the New Critical intention of objectivity.

Having published his first full-length collection (*Reasons for Moving*) just the year before writing the preface to his anthology, Strand was still developing his own aesthetic of voice and style, and therefore naturally was concerned with the personal styles of other, older poets, as he said in an interview with Richard Vine and Robert von Hallberg:

We all require a certain amount of self-definition, and self-definition means being recognizable as someone different from the others. I think that poets, particularly young poets, really want that in their work. They don't want their poems to sound like someone else's. In the very beginning, of course, they do. It gives their poems authority. They want to sound like Eliot or Lowell because that's what poetry sounds like to them. If they write like established poets, their poems will sound like real poems. (131-32)

Strand, then, tried to determine these older poets' "imaginative roots," by which he seems to mean their forms as well as their subjects. And when subsequently breaking from them, he developed what he considered his own, idiosyncratic voice (as we shall see in chapter 4). It is understandable, too, that many of the poets represented in his anthology would turn to "self-definition," not because of the then increasing trend towards introspection, but also as an organizing principle for their poems in light of the absence of traditional prosody, as previously suggested, and as Bruce Weigl has written: "The most immediate reason for the common use of autobiographical detail, structure, context, or strategy within the contemporary tradition seems to be the increasingly widespread use of the freeverse form, especially in the latter half of the twentieth century. Given the absence of traditional prosody to organize and structure a poem, it became necessary for poets to look elsewhere for organizing principles, the most common of which presents private consciousness for public consumption: telling a story about oneself" (113).

David Ignatow explains more specifically, and in more depth, that the concentration on the self as subject matter is necessary in our age, and that a poet's notion of selfhood will ultimately dictate the principal structural means of the

poem. More important to Ignatow, as he said in "A Dialogue at Compas," is the model (inclusive of the impetus of poetry written in intentional rejection of that model) Whitman provides for this kind of poem:

...the mainstream in American poetry derives from Walt Whitman. It's not so much a celebration of oneself, and not oneself as a self, but as a self which is a personification or a surrogate of another power transcending the individual power. And it's not so much a poetry of optimism as a poetry of self-identification with that which exists above and beyond us.... We question ourselves as being surrogates of any kind of divine energy, and American poets are sons and daughters of Walt Whitman. We are still arguing this problem with him. We are asking him, "Are you still viable?" We don't believe he's viable to the extent that he thought of himself as viable... But to give up entirely is to let ourselves sink into something which we just don't want to imagine. So we are at a point now where we talk to him, argue with him, refute him, and when things become very desperate for us... we have an automatic reflex and fall back upon things that he said. We fall back upon the self once more. But that's still not adequate, which is the main problem. We're in a crisis... right now as poets. (62-3)

When poets "fall back upon the self," their poetry becomes more personal, in search of the proper definition, or re-definition, of one's self, marked by a distinctive style as Strand and Bly have mentioned. Yet Strand feels there should be limitations of subject in trying to create a poetry that is, as Ignatow said, a "celebration of oneself... a poetry of self-identification with that which exists above and beyond us." Eliot called for a poet, in "retaining all the particularity of his experience, to make of it a general symbol," but sometimes, Strand suggests, a poet does not have a personal experience that can be applied generally, as he said of Adrienne Rich's work. In response to Richard Vine's question: "Would it make sense for any poet today to address his readers the way Whitman addressed his?" Strand replied

It would be ridiculous.... It's very presumptuous, I think, of anyone to address himself to a whole nation. And it is a bit self-defeating to address yourself to the little sunbirds of poetry. But I'm not sure that one has to do either one of those things. I think all you can do is address yourself to ideas and issues that you yourself are concerned about. Hopefully, these exist at the very center of your culture and have to do with being human and being alive. Poetry doesn't usually address itself to specific issues. Such issues tend to diminish... I am not sure that the issues to which Adrienne Rich addresses herself right now, and the terms in which she addresses them, are overriding.... A

poet must invite you out of yourself with what you yourself have. He can't bombard you with prejudice. Reading Rich one is participating in an assault, or one is defending one's self. I just don't believe, for example, that all women are lesbians. Some are. But the argument is: well, they all would be if they had the courage. That's like saying all men are killers, etc. (132–33)

In following Bly's directive, then, to write about "the most important experiences of our time" in a new style, Rich, Strand contends, has failed to make clear how the issue of her private self becomes "a general symbol." Rather, like the poets of whom Simpson wrote, Rich seems to feel that "the present moment is everything," that "there is no longer a tribe" to which she must address her personal poetry other than the community she has conceived. I use Strand's remarks about Rich to illustrate that although personal poetry was one result of the break from the New Critical "old style," it was not the only one; poetry written in open form does not make it personal nor does it represent a school uniform in theory or content. The various notions of selfhood we have seen indicate each poet's individual scope in constituting one's "subjective experience."

It was earlier suggested that personal poetry may have been an effect of the need for an organizing principle "in the absence of traditional prosody," but as Berg and Mezey write in their foreword of *The New Naked Poetry* (1976), this may not be:

One academic fellow who saw a preliminary version of this book wondered why the editors did not write a long essay defining the "genre" of open form and relating each poet to this "genre." That doesn't seem to be the right word. Listening to the sounds of Ethridge Knight and Robert Duncan, for example, we do not believe it means anything to say they are both working in the "genre" of open form. We would suggest the fellow have a look at "Some Notes on Organic Form" in the first *Naked Poetry* Organic—the metaphor is of the living and growing thing. The rhythm and shape of the flower cannot be made clear as separate from or meaning anything different from the coming to be a flower. (xviii)

Whereas the more traditional poetry of New Criticism was, in fact, a seemingly unified school representing the dominant period style, poetry of open form, the "new style" (again, much of which is personal poetry) is neither uniform in subject nor technique, as evident by the disagreements cited by poets over the role of Whitman, the extent of personal, subjective experiences as matters for poetry, audience concern, and so forth. Further, not all personal poetry need be expressed in open form, as will be demonstrated with some of Lowell's work discussed in

the next chapter and a few poems of Strand (forthcoming in chapter 4). About poetry of open form Strand wrote in his essay "Notes on the Craft of Poetry":

It hardly seems worthwhile to point out the shortsightedness of those practitioners who would have us believe that the form of the poem is merely its shape. They argue that there is formal poetry and poetry without form, free verse in other words, and that formal poetry has dimensions that are rhythmic or stanzaic, etc., and consequently measurable. But if we have learned anything from the poetry of the last twenty or thirty years, it is that free verse is as formal as any other verse. There is ample evidence that it uses a full range of mnemonic devices, the most common being anaphoral and parallelistic structures, both as syntactically restrictive as they are rhythmically binding. I do not want to suggest that measured verse and free verse represent opposing mnemonics; I would rather we considered them together, both being structured or shaped and thus formal, or at least formal in outward, easily described ways. (344–45)

So far, then, all we have established is that personal poetry is not wholly without form—rather, it is usually in an ambiguous "open form" or, as Robert Phillips observed, in "the language.. .of ordinary speech, whether in blank verse or no" (9)—and that it represents a marked distinction from the more objective subject matter ("history and culture in the manner of Auden," as Simpson said of Plath's early work) of the poetry it succeeded. That is, its subject became more and more that of the subjective self. Yet this is not to presume that all poetry of the "new style" is personal poetry. Let us again turn to Strand for a general description of American poetry since the New Critical verse of the 1950s; he told Plumly:

I'm not sure I would characterize recent poetry or post-World War II poetry as anti-poetry. We had a terrific resurgence of formalist poetry in the 50's, and what we had combating that, I guess, was "beat poetry". . .anti-poetry is really modern poetry. Contemporary poetry isn't modern poetry, and it isn't anti-poetry. I feel very much a part of a new international style that has a lot to do with plainness of diction, a certain reliance on surrealist techniques, a certain reliance on journalistic techniques, a strong narrative element, etc. Now I realize this doesn't cover all of contemporary poetry.. . (57)

But it does, I suggest, provide a broad summation of the arrival (and brief description) of the style of personal poetry.

Both *Naked Poetry* and *The Contemporary American Poets*, viewed in retrospect (it is interesting that neither book included the work of the editor, or

editors, of the other), were important in identifying the poetic taste of the period in style and subject, a preference, once established, that has remained in fashion for the nearly three decades following their publication. Although Strand chose from among poems published since 1940—which is to say that some are in measured forms even though the “formal” verse in his anthology is often only very loosely, or irregularly, metered and rhymed—he betrays, by his selection of those poems, an explicit favor for those in open form. Most likely, then, the general consensus is that personal poetry is best presented in that way.

Louis Simpson's remarks lend support here. Writing of Auden's formal verse, which influence, Simpson believed, prolonged the reign of the New Critical school, he offers his version in *A Revolution in Taste* of how current poetry became *so* self-involved and written in open form:

...something was missing in Auden's concept of poetry, and what this was became evident when the Welsh poet Dylan Thomas began his American tours. The missing quality was passion. In Thomas this was expressed in music, the sound of words, over and above what they might be saying. A poem by Auden was an exercise in reason, listening to a poem by Thomas was an experience. At the boom of his voice from the platform the Audenesque facade began to crack, and a few years later Allen Ginsberg brought it tumbling down. The poet moved to the center of the stage and spoke his mind freely. This became the common stance for poets in the years that followed. “Most artists and critics,” said Susan Sontag, writing in the sixties “have discarded the theory of art as representative of an outer reality in favor of art as subjective expression.” (xvi)

The primary reason for the continuing emphasis on the self in poetry following the decades of the 1960s, Simpson would argue, is no longer an issue of form, or the need for passionate presentation of a verse no longer “objective,” no longer Audenesque, but it is a consequence of the society which spawns it:

If one considers the impersonality of the modern bureaucratic state it is likely that, more and more, poetry will be written to express the life of an individual....

To most people living in the West, poetry has become almost exclusively a means of self-expression. This is bound to continue until the aim of education is changed, and this must wait on changes in society as a whole. (169)

Robert Penn Warren, in his prose work *Democracy and Poetry* (1975), presents a similar notion, but from a different perspective:

In the preceding essay I looked at our poetry as a record of the dwindling of our conception of the self. Then I was regarding poetry as “diagnostic,” as a social document; I noted how it has analyzed and recorded a crucial ailment of our democracy: the progressive decay of the notion of the self. Now I am regarding poetry as “therapeutic”; I am trying to indicate how, in the end, in the face of the increasingly disintegrative forces in our society, poetry may reaffirm and reinforce the notion of the self. Though I hasten to say that the end of poetry is to be poetry, and that only insofar as it fulfills that end may it properly serve either diagnostic or therapeutic ends. (42)

But Richard Hugo thought a democratic society allows poetry—no matter what its purpose—to flourish, as he stated in “Stray Thoughts on Roethke and Teaching”:

Mark Strand remarked.. .that American poetry could not help but get better and better, and I'm inclined to agree. I doubt that we'll have the one big figure of the century the way other nations do, Yeats, Valéry. Giants are not the style of the society, though the wind knows there are enough people who want to create them, and not just a few who want to be them. I think we'll end up with a lot of fine poets, each doing his thing. (33)

That the subject of self—whether “the progressive decay of the notion of self,” as Warren said, or the representation of “art as subjective experience,” as did Sontag—is the predominant one in our current poetry supports the argument of a lingering Romantic tradition. Leonard Nathan believes that the personal “I” introduced by William Wordsworth in his “There was a boy” (Nathan writes: “Only a critic defending a theoretical position could doubt that the Wordsworth in ‘There was a boy’ is the real Wordsworth,”) continues now in the form of our “confessional” verse, and he cites other characteristics of Romanticism in today's personal poetry:

The third new element in poetry, besides the private “I” and the importance of pathos, is the loosening of form and structure, which follows from the fact that poems are in some sense—in theory if not in practice—the spontaneous overflow of feeling, in other words, the individual awareness actually in the process of discovering or experiencing its own deepest emotions.... [T]he exaggeration I have presented as Romantic poetic practice and theory is more or less the reality today. It is as if a certain logic based on Romantic premises had worked itself out to its conclusion, a conclusion which no contemporary poet is spared, no matter how anti-Romantic he may think himself. (88)

The self is certainly not a contemporary notion for poets, as Edmund Wilson argued rather succinctly in his *Axel's Castle*. Its most recent ancestor—which is to say that the self has been a subject for verse periodically throughout history (one discussion of confessional poetry began with a sonnet from Shakespeare; others have traced the mode from Sappho through Catullus, Augustine, and Rousseau)—is nineteenth century Romanticism, which, Wilson said,

was a revolt of the individual. . . [The Classical poet] would consider it artistic bad taste to identify his hero with himself and to glorify himself with his hero, or to intrude between the reader and the story and give vent to his personal emotions. But in [Romantic poetry] the writer is either his own hero, or unmistakably identified with his hero, and the personality and emotions of the writer are presented as the principal subject of interest.... Byron and Wordsworth ask us to be interested in themselves by virtue of the intrinsic value of the individual: they vindicate the rights of the individual against the claims of society. . . it is always, as in Wordsworth, the individual sensibility, or, as in Byron, the individual will, with which the Romantic poet is pre-occupied. (2–4)

Wilson has separated “the poet as his own hero” from a “created” hero with whom the poet is “unmistakably identified,” a distinction which can be made in contemporary personal verse, particularly that of the confessional and persona modes of voice.

Alan Williamson suggests that the need for poets to be their own artistic heroes is cultural, and that introspection is a result of historical and sociological sequences:

The diffusion of psychoanalysis in the general culture, and the sheer amount of inner conflict and turmoil experienced by some of the most talented poets of the period, are factors that should not be underestimated. But the larger political history may have been even more important. The poets who shaped contemporary poetry all came of age sometime between the rise of Hitler and the fall of Joe McCarthy—that is to say, during a time when the relative influence of irrational hatreds, fears, and identifications, as against pragmatic interests, in political life seemed more disproportionate than it had, perhaps, for several centuries. The responses of the great Modernist writers to this history—wrongheaded, symbolic, and personally driven as they often were—I suspect helped later poets conclude that a psychology beginning at home was a necessary middle term between poetic sensibility and impersonal or ideological judgment. (2)

Whether certain Romantic tendencies emerged again in poetry since the 1950s, or cultural conditions influenced the subject matter of poetry—whatever the reasons—poets became more personal than objective, more inward directed than outward. And although, as Wilson traced for us, history shows this not to be unique, never has the concern for self so completely dominated any period of poetry, any style, as it has our present one.

Yet, be that the personal poem's reliance on self as principles of theme and structure is predominant, it is somewhat surprising that much academic commentary of contemporary poetry has been focused on other subjects. At present, the critical fashion is to find meaning between the texts (or to find no meaning at all). Some French theorists have deconstructed “I,” showing language's disengagement from reality. The self in the poem is but an illusion in this regard. “There are no texts, but only relationships *between* texts” (3), Harold Bloom tells us in *A Map of Misreading*, which de-emphasizes the author's work as a distinctive object of art and removes the focus from the author of (and very much in) the work. Indeed, Roland Barthes (in “The Death of the Author”) would have us believe there are no poets either, in addition to there being no texts. And Helen Vendler has minimized the importance of autobiography in Robert Lowell's most personal poetry, preferring instead to concentrate on the objects he describes, his external stimuli. She has written of the Lowell of *Life Studies* “[F]or all his learning and his intellectuality, for all his interior ‘autobiography’ even, Lowell is a poet essentially externalized—in data, in description, in scene, in action, in history” (351).

Despite the critical preference of the most famous literary theorists and commentators, a few younger critics in this country, not yet widely known and oftentimes poets themselves, have begun to argue the significance of personal poetry and to examine more closely the poets' personalities and lives in relation to their poems, as this study must do in contending for the modes of voice in current practice. Alan Williamson has pointed towards the critical bias against the examination of the self, stating: “[A]lthough the importance of subjectivism in the development of contemporary poetry is universally acknowledged, there seems to be a certain resistance to making it the main focus of critical scrutiny—especially an implicitly approving scrutiny” (5–6). And the poet Dave Smith, in reference to the poetry of James Wright, has written in *The Pure Clear Word*

We live in a time when critical theory has called into question not merely the function of art but the very existence of art. Theorists deny there can be an author. From Derrida to Culler to Fish, the talk is of the **text**, an impersonal object neither story nor poem. The desire of such criticism, whatever its Archimedean point, is to bring to literature the objectivity of scientific

inquiry; that is, to codify what and how literature knows. This is the direction and legacy of New Criticism in part, of modernist rebellion in part—but it is largely the temperament of the industrial world. While criticism fabricates objectivity and impersonality, becoming at last not a way of experiencing art but a kind of parodic extension of Robert Frost's remark about free verse—that is, a game played without net, racket, or balls—poetry has gone in the opposite direction. To understand and to follow James Wright's development as a poet we have to search for the man in the poems. (xii)

Consequently, there has not been a study of the self as subject, particularly in relation to the contemporary poem's use of a voice persona, the modes of which are defined as follows:

*The Confessional Mode*, which employs "I" as the principal speaker, relates a personal incident of the poet's public self—an incident either actual, that is, autobiographical, or created from the imagination—usually intended as a means of self-identification, self-definition, and which often evokes pathos in the reader, although the incident depicted in a poem of this mode can be joyous as well. This "I" is the sincere voice of the poet (intended or not), one used as the primary instrument in presenting the poem. The poet who writes in the confessional mode of voice attempts to present the "I" as the self he or she wishes to define by the poem.

*The Persona Mode*, which combines the seemingly veracious elements of the subjective voice of the confessional mode with the apparent objectivity of the self-effacing poem, invents a character as the narrator of a personal incident (again, real or imagined by the poet). This character is closely associated with the poet's public self. It is his or her mask through which a personal experience can be related with both the subjective (and often pathetic) expression of the confessional voice and the objective stance a poet takes when narrating an account of an imagined character. The modernist archetype for this mode is Pound's "Hugh Selwyn Mauberley."

*The Self-Effacing Mode*, which also uses "I" as its principal speaker, attempts to depersonalize the voice of the poet's public self in order to render a seemingly objective account of a personal experience (actual or invented) of that self. The depersonalized voice acts to control the tone of the poem so that if pathos is evoked in the reader, it derives from

the incident depicted by the poem, not the voice (as it often does in the confessional mode). More commonly, however, the poem will contain themes of absence, self-alienation, and its "I" speaker will attempt to define himself or herself within the context of these themes. The poet who writes in this mode attempts not actually to obliterate his or her public self from the poem, but to transcend that public, sincere voice in order to become inconspicuous so to effect a seemingly objective voice, one illustrative of the world this public self finds alien.

Poets covered in the period of this study (roughly, the late 1950s to the present, with the exception of the poetry of Weldon Kees which precedes that date) tend to write in all three modes. Most betray a marked preference for one mode over the other two, but it is rare for a poet to practice one voice exclusively. I intend to illustrate my thesis by examining the work of three poets major to this study, one for each mode, and also show how each poet writes in all three modes. In addition, for each mode I will analyze the work of two other poets whose verse I will treat only in the mode of voice I have chosen it to exemplify. As mentioned, Robert Lowell will serve as the major figure for the confessional, John Berryman for the persona mode, and Mark Strand for the self-effacing.

Of particular note: My definition of "confessional" (that it is one type of persona) may vary from its current usage—but that varies widely too. Phillips wrote that "Lowell and Allen Ginsberg eschew *personae* altogether" (9) and so are confessional, but to the contrary, each adopts the persona of his public self as the speaker of his confessional verse, so that James Merrill is right in observing that confessionalism "is a literary convention like any other, the problem being to make it *sound* as if it were true," that is, to sound sincere, as I would amend Merrill's remark. Simpson properly identifies Lowell's and others' work of the confessional mode as "deliberate self-portraiture," however misguided he may be in agreeing with Rosenthal about Sexton's placing "the literal [authentic] self... at the center of the poem."

David Ignatow, one of the self-effacing poets, wrote in his *Notebooks* "Obviously, I'm not a confessional poet. I feel no guilt or hatred or consuming love that must be allowed to spill over" (qtd. in *New Naked Poetry* 112). And Snodgrass has said to David Dillon: "...my poems aren't confessional. That has to imply that one is talking about some kind of forbidden activity and doing it in a rather lurid way—like a confessional magazine" (219).

Simpson, Ignatow, and Snodgrass have differing conceptions of the term “confessional poet,” and each differs from mine. A poem using the mode of persona as voice which I term confessional does not have to “confess” anything as Ignatow suggests it must — particularly “in a rather lurid way” as Snodgrass thinks — nor does the poem’s subject need to be autobiographical. But the voice requires, at the least, a semblance of a personal experience that is plausible, and it must be sincere in the presentation of that experience in Lionel Trilling’s sense — that the poet must represent his or her speaker and experience to us in believable fashion. The confessional voice may be closely associated with the poet’s private self, as I have defined it, but it is the poet’s public voice used with the knowledge that his or her poems’ audience is the public. The poet successfully evoking pathos, then, is the confessional poet “weeping with one eye on the camera,” as Simpson remarked. Sincerity will distinguish, ultimately, the confessional mode of voice from the self-effacing, as we shall see.

This study is one of criticism. That is, it asserts a theory I will attempt to prove by my analysis of the work of representative poets. The reasons for my selecting these poets are stated in the chapters in which their works are treated. As indicated previously, not all poetry of this country since the late 1950s concerns the self, or is personal poetry, one attempting answers to what Emerson called the “burden” of the individual: to define himself in relation to his immediate surroundings, his community, and the age in which he finds himself belonging. Consequently, many of the best-known poets of our day are not mentioned in the following chapters, or if they are, only briefly and usually derogatorily by the poets whom I do include — for poets concerning themselves with the self are often not sympathetic to those whose primary focus is on form, say, or the direction of “the lyric,” or popular philosophy, or anything else besides the self. Bly, therefore, will derogate the work of John Ashbery, as he did in an interview with Wayne Dodd “Ashbery has become an utterly academic poet. Academic poetry in the fifties was recognizable by emotional anemia and English meter. Now it is recognizable by fake French surrealism and emotional anemia. In Ashbery there is no anger, there is no world” (299), and David Ignatow will say things like: “John Ashbery is not dealing with this subject [self] at all. Neither is a critic like Harold Bloom. They are critics of literature, they are writers of *literature*; they are not writers of life” (*open Between Us* 63).

Disregarding aesthetic favoritism, I have excluded such well-known poets as Ashbery, Kenneth Koch, and James Merrill from this study simply because they have not written enough about the self. Nor do these poets have, in most of their work, an identifiable voice as persona. In their poetry of images, or ideas, or

lyricism, the voice is indeterminate and therefore cannot be traced to any mode. W. S. Merwin is excluded for this reason, even though Strand, Kinnell, and others speak well of his work. This may raise the issue of my exclusion of poets who do write of the self and whose voice is clearly distinguishable in their work. But this study is not a survey of the poets of personal verse. Rather it posits the critical assumption that any woman or man writing of the self does so in one of the three modes of voice I have identified, and that the poets I do use in the study are exemplary of anyone writing in these modes. In this regard, then, I have not excluded any poet, for her or his aesthetic, or technique of voice, is represented by the work I have chosen to discuss. My only criteria of selection were that the poets clearly reflect the practice of the mode (which I believe they do) and that their national identity was American — not origin, that is, for Strand was born in Summerside, Prince Edward Island, Canada, and Simic in Yugoslavia.

A final word before turning to those poets: Since Lowell, Wright, Sexton, Berryman, and Kees are deceased — more than half the poets whose work I discuss in the ensuing pages — I have concluded with a chapter which examines a few younger poets presently writing personal poetry to determine whether the use of voice in the confessional, persona, and self-effacing modes has continued in today’s practice, or has died with the older poets. In addition, I have updated the work of the poets I treat in chapters 2 through 4 who are still living — that is, I discuss their most recent poems — in order to comment on their continuing, or discontinuing, uses of voice in their personal poetry through the 1990s. But enough of what is to come. It is time to let the poets and their poems speak for themselves and to make their voices and personae known.