

The Concept and Function of “Persona” in Modern Poetry

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Abstract: With the advent of “modernism” a radical shift came to take place; the relation between the voice, who speaks in the work of art, and the author behind that work of art took a new form. Earlier reductive view of art as a direct expression of the author's or poet's mind or feeling had been questioned by the new wave of impersonal poetry. In the following essay I undertake to show how this shift took place with the genealogical enquiry of the basic concepts in this controversial field of literary criticism.

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'Persona was the Latin word for the mask worn by actors in the classical theatre, from which was derived the term *dramatis personae* for the list of characters who play a role in a drama and ultimately the English word “person,” a particular individual. In recent literary discussion “persona’ is often applied to a first-person speaker who tells the story in a narrative poem or novel, or whose voice we hear in a lyric poem’ (217). In this definition of the “persona” M.H. Abrams unconsciously sheds light at two important facts; one is that “persona” was born by a difference; it was certainly not the Greek actor; it was “the word for the mask”, yet it was not the mask; the mask is “persona” when it acts, when it performs. The second fact is that the English ‘person’ derived from ‘persona’; character came first, person later. In the ancient world the use of ‘persona’ was not limited to the theatrical use; it was put on even by the orators for the sake of make-believe, as David Mikics writes, ‘Aristotle in his *Rhetoric* (ca.350 BCE) pays great attention to the character that an orator should present to his audience in order to get them to believe him’ (230). When we are given a poem we immediately enquire who the poet is. It had been the way we learnt to receive a piece of poetry in our country, where the most common questions in schools or colleges are ‘who is the poet?’ or ‘Who is the speaker?’ or when we start taking poetry seriously our curiosity roughly centres around works of celebrated authors, although it is a different fact that in our early childhood we are more interested in reading or gossiping adventures of famous characters, authors hardly hold grave importance. I don’t expect universal confirmation of my observation, as it is neither desirable nor available. However, when we read the following poem, “Sir, say it no more” the importance of the authorial experience looks desirable.

Sir, say no more,
Within me 'tis as if
The green and climbing eyesight of a cat
Crawled near my mind's poor birds. (Kennedy 515)

This monologue puts forth an ambiguity when read from a Formalist perspective. Reluctant to hear further from someone called 'Sir', the speaker turns inward and puts forth a wild image of a cat preying on "poor birds" in green vegetation. But is it a "complete" reading? Isn't a sense of confusion lurking behind us? How do birds belong to the mind of the speaker? Doesn't it now look inevitable to cross the terminological understanding of the work into the metaphoric world of the poem that *seems* to offer a fuller interpretation of the work? We come to know that Trumbull Stickney (1874-1904) wrote the poem shortly before his death. He had been afflicted by the cancer of the brain. The poem starts acquiring a clearer meaning than the earlier formalist one as an expression of the suffering that he had to suffer before his death. "But the poem is not a prosaic entry in the diary of a dying man, nor is it a good poem because a dying man wrote it. Not only does it tell truth from experience, it speaks in memorable words" (Kennedy 515). It may not be a direct expression of the poet or suffering man; instead, here, the speaker is a fictional character or "persona". Both the Formalist and Expressive understandings of the poem are reductive; they take the poem to two opposite directions, one to the complete annihilation of the authorial agency and other far beyond the text. The greater challenge would be how we explore the complex relationship between the poet and the fictional "persona" without reducing poetry to either mere words or the poet, because the following piece conspicuously shows the need of a middle-ground:

Since I have been so quickly done for,

I wonder what I was begun for. (Kennedy 516)

These lines are originally an epigraph on the tombstone of an infant in Burial Hill cemetery, Plymouth, Massachusetts. Kennedy observes, "We do not know who wrote those lines, but it is clear that the poet was not a short-lived infant writing from personal experience" (Kennedy 516). Therefore someone else has written the poem, and the infant is just a 'character' or 'persona'. Neither the form nor the author is exclusively instrumental in the understanding of the poem. Instead, we need to look into the tragic death of an infant and its fictional representation in the work. Therefore, 'persona' has proximity with the personality of the poet, although they are not *identical*. The 'persona' may be a creation of the author, but it is a creation, which delimits the power of the same author. Apart from this we need to be careful in maintaining a sharp distinction among the fictional speaker in a poem and the 'persona' and the poet. Instead of the 'created' we must look for how this same is created. The fictional speaker is necessarily the 'persona' of the poet when it presents complex relationship with the poet, in which the poet consciously figures and plays with an 'alter-ego'. Laurence Lerner writes, "[Persona's] most useful meaning as a critical term equates it neither with the poet himself, on the one hand, nor with the fictitious speaker, on the other (we already have terms for both these concepts), but refers to the conscious playing by the poet of a role that bears a close relation to the self" (35). The use of "persona" in poetry was always a favourite device of the modern Anglo-

American poets, like Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot, and Irish Poet W. B. Yeats. Given impetus by the French symbolism, dissociation took place between the ego of the poet and the characters or speaker in the poems. The voice that we hear in a poem does hardly represent the echoes of the poet's heart in question. The “I” of the poem is dramatized “I”, no association with the man using the pen is possible. Richard C. Elliott gives a comprehensive account of the evolution and use of “persona” in modern English poetry in his classic book *The Literary Persona*:

In the “modernist” literature of the first half of the twentieth century the idea of the persona is everywhere. Popularized by Ezra Pound, given impetus by Yeats, institutionalized by Eliot in his poetry and criticism, the notion of the persona is at the center of that phase of modernism which holds that the “I” of a poem is always a dramatized “I,” no more to be identified with the actual poet living in history than the Bishop ordering his tomb to be identified with Robert Browning...To identify “I” and author was as illegitimate as to inquire into authorial “sincerity,” a dim practice of nineteenth-century critics that seemed finally laid to rest. (16)

It is their dissatisfaction with the “expressive” line of poetry that urged the “modernist” poets to make use of masks or fictional voices. Here, they were also largely inspired by the “dramatic monologues” of Robert Browning. The Victorian Poet's “dramatic monologues”, such as “My Last Duchess”, “Andrea del Sarto”, “The Bishop Orders His Tomb”, which deliberately show that the voice we hear in the poem and the poet who writes are not same. Jeffrey Wainwright writes, “All these [poems] have Italian Renaissance settings, and so while the poems feature an ‘I’ speaking to us, the reader recognizes the distance from Browning when his Fra Lippo Lippi, painter and monk, says, ‘You understand me: I’m a beast, I know.’” (51) Early twentieth century was really a time of the rejection of the autonomy of the artist in the work of art. In Europe 1920s was known for the introduction of what is now known as “formalism” by two prominent British art critics, Clive Bell and Roger Fry. Terry Barrett writes:

Formalism and modernism are inextricably linked, although the former is an outgrowth of the latter. Bell and Fry sought to ignore as irrelevant the artist's intent in making a work of art and any social and ideological function the artist may have wanted the work to have. Instead, the “significant form” of the artwork was what was to be exclusively attended to. (21)

Form took precedence over expression and art evolved bigger than the shadow of the artist. In tandem of “formalism” of Bell and Fry, early twentieth century English literature bended towards the formal perfection. 1930s was the period of New Criticism, a school of thought promoted by T. S. Eliot, I. A. Richards, F. R. Leavis, and Cleanth Brooks. They wanted to shift the critics' interests from the exploration of what the author tried to express to the art itself by focusing at the use of language, imagery, and metaphor. “They were attempting to correct the then-current practice of critics placing too much emphasis on information outside of a literary work – for example, on a poet's biography and

particular psychology, rather than on the actual text” (Barrett 22). However, when Aristotle spoke of the use of feigned character by an orator, he meant “role-playing”, a trick what is later used by Iago in Shakespeare's *Othello*. The arch-villain decides to disguise as a loyal servant and aid of his rivals and hides his real motives. Ezra Pound's use of “personae” went a different way. He used them as “alter-egos”, exactly the opposite of the “self”, hence the “anti-self”. His “personae” were originally poets of past times, who were employed by the poet to deal with certain issues (mostly literary). Therefore, the “personae” bear the marks of two contrary poetic personalities acting out larger differences between two different literary periods. Louis L. Martz observes that Pound's use of “persona” was an offshoot of his turning away from romanticism under the influence of T. E. Hulme, whose objection was to the pathetic use of emotions in poetry by the romantics. In his introduction to Pound's early poems he quotes Hulme:

I object to the sloppiness which doesn't consider that a poem is a poem unless it is moaning or whining about something or other ... The thing has got so bad now that a poem which is all dry and hard, a properly classical poem, would not be considered poetry at all ... Poetry that isn't damp isn't poetry at all ... There is a general tendency to think that verse means little else than the expression of unsatisfied emotion. (x)

Instead, 'Hulme wanted discipline, precision, “the exact curve of the thing,” “dry hardness,” classicism' (Daiches 1122). Pound met Hulme in 1909 and possibly the result was the following poem, “*Revolt: Against the Crepuscular Spirit in Modern Poetry*”, published in *Personae* in 1909:

I would shake off the lethargy of this our time, and give
For shadows – shapes of power
For dreams – men.
“It is better to dream than do”?
Aye! And, No!
Aye! if we dream great deeds, strong men,
Hearts hot, thoughts mighty.
No! If we dream pale flowers,
Slow-moving pageantry of hours that languidly
Drop as o'er-ripened fruit from sallow trees...
Great God, if men are grown but pale sick phantoms
That must live only in these mists and tempered lights
And tremble for dim hours that knock o'er loud
Or tread too violent in passing them;
Great God, if these thy sons are grown such thin ephemera,
I bid thee grapple chaos and beget
Some new titanic spawn to pile the hills and stir
This earth again. (Pound xi-xii)

God was not unwilling enough to fulfil Pound's wish of a regenerative “spawn”, only Pound's glance had to move backwards instead of near future for the prospective of a “spawn”. When the romantic and later Tennyson poets were found lacking in drive towards formal perfection in poetry and objectivity, Pound looked back at a Victorian poet, Robert

Browning. It is now a cliché that all the discussions on "dramatic monologue" should take into account Robert Browning's contribution to the popularity and critical acclaim of this sub-genre. Although, for Pound Browning was not only a literary model, but also one of the "personae" or "masks" he made a successful use of. Martz writes:

'In Robert Browning, certainly, whose strident voice is humorously imitated in "Mesmerism"... and whose bracing impact upon the whole Victorian scene Pound represents in a poem to Elizabeth Barrett Browning, here first published.... The voice of Browning is clear in many of these of these early monologues, in "Cino," "Marvail," "Piere Vidal Old," in the long poem here first published, "Capilupus Sends Greeting to Grotus," and in many other places, as late as the bitter parody in Canto 80: "Oh to be in England now that Winston's out." (xii)

Nevertheless, it is in the *Personae*, that the influence of Browning shows dominantly. Pound's preoccupation with the idea of the "persona" derived from his idea of the poet as a "prophet". The original Greek term *prophētēs* referred to a "spokesman", "one who speaks for another" (Martz xii). Also in the Roman world the poets were hailed as prophets, in Latin *vates*. In his classic *An Apology for Poetry*, Sidney writes:

Among the Romans a port was called *vates*, which is as much a diviner, foreseer, or prophet, as by his conjoined words vaticinium and vaticinari, is manifest; so heavenly a title did that excellent people bestow upon this heart-ravishing knowledge. (Sidney 329)

The poet, therefore, etymologically comes with the notion of prophecy; when he creates he is not in his sense, he is possessed by a divine power or by the muses. That is exactly why you will find no response if you ask a poet after his creation is done what primary experiences or feelings he has used. Plato's master Socrates had a same experience when he dared ask some poets the meaning of their own passages:

I went to the poets; tragic, dithyrambic, and all sorts....I took them some of the elaborate passages in their own writings, and asked what was the meaning of them....Will you believe me? ...there is hardly a person present who would not have talked better about their poetry than they did themselves. Then I knew that not by wisdom do poets write poetry, but by a sort of genius and inspiration. (Plato)

Apart from that of a "seer", the term *prophētēs* also referred to a teacher. Pound too emphasised upon both prophetic and pedagogic functions of poetry. In a manuscript note to the short poem "*Histrion*", the poet wrote, "I do not teach—I awake" (Martz xii). Martz believes that Pound's poet is endowed with a cosmic vision that takes in even the creation of the world. Martz believes that his 1913 poem "*From Chebar*" alludes to the first verse of Ezekiel ("In the thirtieth year, in the fourth month, on the fifth day of the month, as I was among the exiles by the river Chebar, the heavens were opened, and I saw visions of God" (xii), which represents the poet as a biblical prophet:

Before you were, America / I did not begin with you, / I do not end with you, America.... / Oh I can see you, / I with the maps to aid me, / I can see the coast and the forest / And the corn-yellow plains and the

hills, / The doomed sky and the jagged, / The plainsmen and men of
the cities.... / I have seen the dawn mist / Move in the yellow grain, / I
have seen the daubed purple sunset; / You may kill me, but I do not
accede, / You may ignore me, you may keep me in exile, / You may
assail me with negations, or you may keep me a while well hidden, /
But I am after you and before you, / And above all, I do not accede....
(Martz xii-xiii)

For, Pound the poet is a site infrequently visited by the spirit of the dead poets of the past. When he writes, all the voices of the past get alive and speak through him. In the short poem, "*Histrion*" Pound's lifelong preoccupation with the prophetic role of the poet appears all the more palpable:

No man hath dared to write this thing as yet,
And yet I know, how that the souls of all men great
At times pass through us,
And we are melted into them, and are not
Save reflexions of their souls,
Thus am I Dante for a space and am
One Francois Villon, ballad-lord and thief
Or am such holy ones I may not write,
Lest blasphemy be writ against my name;
This for an instant and the flame is gone.
'Tis as in midmost us there glows a sphere
Translucent, molten gold, that is the "I"
And into this some form projects itself:
Christus, or John, or eke the Florentine;
And as the clear space is not if a form's
Imposed thereon,
So cease we from all being for the time,
And these, the Masters of the soul, live on. (Pound 71)

Significantly "*Histrion*" means "Actor", which refers to the voice of the poet, whose personality ceases to be *his* personality and takes the form of a "persona". Not very dissimilar from Pound's idea of the poetic personality and his use of a persona is T. S. Eliot's idea of the place and function of the poet in the "tradition". In case of W.B. Yeats the "alter-ego" or "persona" acts through the concept of the "mask". Mythic in origin, in the ancient world masks were worn by people at cultural rituals or performances functioning as an emblem of the divine power. "...the mask in a primitive festival is revered and experienced as a veritable apparition of the mythical being that it represents – even though everyone knows that a man made the mask and that a man is wearing it. The one wearing it, furthermore, is identified with the god during the time of the ritual of which the mask is a part. He does not merely represent the god; he is the god" (Campbell, 21). To make it clearer, if someone is wearing the mask of Dionysus, while performing the acts of Dionysus subsumed in the course of action, his state of being an actor passes into oblivion and he is invested with Dionysian forces, and equally revered by the spectators. Therefore, the mask was believed by the people to retain the divine power that it appeared to represent. One memorable example is the last scene of

Girish Karnad's play *The Fire and the Rain*. Arvasu wants to play the role of the demon Vritra in the play-within-the-play "The Triumph of Lord Indra". To perform he must wear the mask of the demon Vritra. The Actor-manager instructs Arvasu while handing over the mask:

Here. This is the mask of Vritra the demon. Now surrender to the mask. Surrender and pour life into it. But remember, once you bring a mask to life you have to keep a tight control over it, otherwise it'll try to take over. It'll begin to dictate terms to you and you must never let that happen. Prostrate yourself before it. Pray to it. Enter it. Then control it. (Mee 72)

Exactly what happens when Arvasu loses control over the mask and takes art to be life and physically assaults Indra (performed by Actor-manager) and burns down the sacrificial pavilion; the mask becomes alive. The Actor-manager approaches the guards to restrain Arvasu and cries out: "It's the mask – it's the mask come alive. Restrain him, or there will be chaos" (Mee 76). Again, when all the faculties of a being come together in the service, or even start playing, with the idea retrieved from the mythical past, a lively image of that idea appears operative even through a petty thing like a match. Joseph Campbell remembers a passage from a famous paper written by Leo Frobenius on the force of the daemonic world of childhood:

A professor...is writing at his desk and his four-year-old little daughter is running about the room. She has nothing to do and is disturbing him. So he gives her three burnt matches, saying, 'Here! Play!' and, sitting on the rug, she begins to play with the matches, Hansel, Gretel, and the witch. A considerable time elapses, during which the professor concentrates upon his task, undisturbed. But then, suddenly, the child shrieks in terror. The father jumps. 'What is it? What has happened?' The little girl comes running to him, showing every sign of great fright. 'Daddy, Daddy,' she cries, 'take the witch away! I can't touch the witch anymore!' (Campbell 22)

Now to quote Frobenius:

An eruption of emotion is characteristic of the spontaneous shift of an idea from the level of the sentiments (*Gemüt*) to that of sensual consciousness (*sinnliches Bewusstsein*). Furthermore, the appearance of such an eruption obviously means that a certain spiritual process has reached a conclusion. The match is not a witch; nor was a witch for the child at the beginning of the game. The process, therefore, rests on the fact that the match has *become* a witch on the level of the sentiments and the conclusion of the process coincides with the transfer of this idea to the plane of consciousness. The observation of the process escapes the test of conscious thought, since it enters consciousness only after or at the moment of completion. However, inasmuch as the idea *is*, it must have *become*. The process is creative, in the highest sense of the word; for, as we have seen, in a little girl, a match can become a witch. Briefly stated, then: the phase of *becoming* takes place on the level of the sentiments, while that of *being* is on the conscious plane. (Frobenius 143-145)

The 'mask' was an essential part of W. B. Yeats' theory of creativity. It plays a vital role in what Richard Ellmann says "[h]is policy of concealment of

his more intimate self” (174). The mask secured his timid and scared (of personal as well as visionary failures) self with a hard and arrogant image from the world. Apart from this, it endowed his writings with “dignity and a kind of traditional sanction to his theories of the pose” (174). Take for example the poem “*The Mask*” published in *The Green Helmet and Other Poems* (1910):

'Put off that mask of burning gold
With emerald eyes.'
'O no, my dear, you make so bold
To find if hearts be wild and wise,
And yet not cold.'
'I would but find what's there to find,
Love or deceit.'
'It was the mask engaged your mind,
And after set your heart to beat,
Not what's behind.'
'But lest you are my enemy,
I must enquire.'
'O no, my dear, let all that be;
What matter, so there is but fire
In you, in me?' (Yeats 43-44)

The lover is hesitant to the demand of his beloved that he should “Put off that mask of burning gold /With emerald eyes” so that she may know him who he really is; she wants to find what is lurking behind the mask, is it “Love or deceit.” The lover shows reluctance to do that as he believes that it is this mask that made her love him, instead of what is behind the mask. The beloved continues to implore him as she is eager to know whether it is her enemy that is hidden behind his outward image. The poem concludes with the lover's persistent denial to entertain her demand and seals off the conversation with triumphant voice by telling that unless there is fire in both nothing else matters. A similar kind of camouflaging is treated in what is popularly known as the first dramatic poem, “if, My Darling” of Philip Larkin. This one is not 'dialectic' like Yeats', but 'monologic', where the poetic speaker suggests that if, like Alice, his beloved had peeped into his head, she would face a completely different image from what had once animated her to love him. She would not find tables, chairs, side-tables with claws made of mahogany, smoothly burning embers, empty Tantalus, comfortable cushions, filled up book-racks, drunk butlers or lazy housemaids; instead, she would find herself in a complex surrealist world, perverse imagination that had shrunk to the size of “of a woman's glove” (Larkin 41), which later had been swelling outwards like blisters, dirty floor, which stinks like,

...the skin of a grave,
From which ascends an adhesive sense of betrayal.... (Larkin 41)

Apart from these unwholesome things, she would find,
A Grecian statue kicked in the privates, money,
A swill-tub of finer feelings. (41)

Nevertheless, what could strike her ears most would be the increased

incantation caused by the speaker's troublesome sense of reality into an abyss, where words turn metaphorical or ambiguous:

But most of all

She'd be stopping her ears against the incessant recital

Intoned by reality, larded with technical terms,

Each one double-yoked with meaning and meaning's rebuttal.... (41)

After she had this that revealed the abominable complexity of the speaker's inside, and the wisdom that the past had passed and future would be 'neuter', she would lose "her unpriceable pivot" (Larkin 41). Both W. B. Yeats and Philip Larkin put up alter-egos in order to conceal their real characters. Edward Larrissy notes, "The idea of the anti-self is closely related to that of the Mask, which is the self's attempt to adopt the semblance of the anti-self. This anti-self is indeed what it sounds like: antagonistic to the given self, its opposite" (Larkin 544). To the lover and the world, as we have already said, the poetic speaker of "The Mask" shows a powerful artistic image, as Larkin's speaker shows what he is actually not (suggested by frequent refusals of sophisticated furniture and attendants). Inside, both of them are vulnerable and 'perplexed to the extreme.' To both of them love or lover appears to be harmful and they are joyous as well as afraid. Each is dragged into a dialectic by his 'Other' or lover and becomes what he is not. Hence is the use of the mask or deceptive eyes (of Larkin's persona). The 'Self' can be salvaged from this self-annihilating love, if love is taken lightly, as a game. Peter, the light lover of *The Player Queen* by Yeats sings of how to play 'love':

True love makes one a slave / Less than a man

The light lover is always love's master

So much the more is he man. (Ellman 175)

Likewise the 'alter-ego' of "If, My darling" carries inside a sense of betrayal, that seems to coming out from the dirty floor, and it is aggravated further with the image of a Greek statue who looks kicked at its "private parts" (Larkin 41).

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