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MYSTERIOUS ME: A BRIEF MEDITATION ON *PERSONAE*

By Leah Souffrant

One of the seductions of poetry, for both reader and writer, is its mystery. The poem draws the reader in as much by what it says as by what it obscures. For the writer, too, poetry seduces with its mysteries. It allows new ways of assembling the dots, beckoning memories, playing echoes. The poem detaches from the poet in space, in song, in its necessary obscurity, and it seduces the poet with the poet's own absence.

Poetry's art recognizes how language stages our attention in this interplay of revealing and concealing. To a writer, pointing, the poem is also hiding, ducking, pointing the other way. At best, the poem is this alluring dance, and the poet recognizes what is happening through an elasticity of perception. We read and write at once.

We mustn't fail to detect the subtleties, even those concealed, revealing mystery. By honing the poet's perception, we perceive what is not revealed. So we sense the importance of perception and a special sort of attention. But what we are evaluating is a shifting site, where even the "I" is unstable.

If the poet is not quite there in the poem's "I," we call this *persona*, defined as "a character assumed" or "a personality projected" or "a façade" or "the person projected." These definitions assert what the phenomenologist suggests is to reveal and conceal at once.

When I provide for you the definition of the term *persona*, I could otherwise say

You don't know me.

These seductions are enticing: variations create opportunities to clarify the multiple possibilities for who we might be, how much we might misunderstand and be misunderstood. The astute reader of poetry discerns the distance between the writer and the “I” of a poem, between the you and the me, the veil, the façade, the mystery of personae that reveals the entanglement of our understanding of each other, ourselves, and all those parts that create it. The threads are densely woven, memory and the plain realness of the page, the word, the dirt under your nail, now. But who are you, even as I plainly say it? Whose nail? What dirt?

The reader hones this perception of subtlety. The reader relies on the work of attention tuned to the entanglement of personae, veiled and unveiling, “I” and “not-I.” You will discover a nuance, a barely perceptible shift, an untraceable deviation that creates a shock of emotional, intellectual, or even physical response.

You can't know me.

Catullus tells Catullus how to think or feel. “I, Catullus,” is not the author Catullus but another Catullus—a Catullus who is not exactly Catullus.

Some speakers will identify their positions clearly. While writing in what readers wish to call an autobiographical mode, a poet may use another name to refer to the speaker, though the speaker (“I”) is, in fact, someone quite like the writer. Of course, in poems there are no facts and no autobiographies, but there are gradations, and fantasy is at one extreme. We read poetry interested in the other extreme, not a defined world.

Mystery is different from fantasy. Who writes other worlds? Who am I—and if I ask you, who then are you? The reader of poetry understands this intricacy. If not, the reader is missing. The point, which eludes, is the mystery to be missed. The dance keeps moving the target, the point. We better be paying attention.

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“I raise the machete,” writes Ai, pen in hand (“Cuba, 1962”). And the reader might ponder this brutal I, hacking at the body. Blood stains poems. We write what doesn’t happen and what does and what might. Veering closer to ourselves or nearing an other, we might grow distant from a notion of self, or more complex in the recognition of its textures. Poetry does important work of refraction, not only reflection.

What is I?

What happens, then, when even the author’s name is anon? What happens, then, when we are?

You will never know me.

To blur matters in the interest of clarity, the writer may choose not to identify the “I” as the self, and may further choose to omit clear markers of identity from the writing. This results, often, in a universalizing of experience. Though not always. The result can also be viewed as an abstraction of self.

I hope I am making myself clear.

We might say that Fernando Pessoa was the poet who observed that

Only if you don’t know what flowers, stones, and rivers are
Can you talk about their feelings.

(“The Keeper of Sheep XXVIII”)

Because Pessoa was relentless in the pursuit of personae, or perhaps because Pessoa was at rest with the notion that the poetic “I” would never be the self, readers now can delight in a more buoyant relationship with the speaker, allowing the imagination to dance with the question: *Who are you?*

And the answer? This Pessoa is Alberto Caeiro. He is also Ricardo Reis and Álvaro de Campos. But these lines about flowers and stones, which I find both playful and utterly serious (as the poems of Pessoa often are) demand of the reader a grappling with the limits of the “lyric I” and the responsibility of poetic address. Do you talk of the feelings of flowers? Do you know what a stone is?

In the case of the mystical poets, the point of interest may not be in the speaker but in the addressee. When Rumi writes of “your love” and “your arms,” we sense the passion of a lover, but “you” for the mystic is often (or always) divine. The skeptic also will ask who is this “I” who speaks to God so directly, speaks of God’s body, which is “like a spark.” Can you be a lover and a god? Can You be a lover and God? Can I be Rumi and Rumi-and-I?

We enter the poem sensing this intimacy with a speaker, this “I” we might own as our very voice even as the writer detaches from it. It is the mystery itself that draws us in again and again, pondering questions even as we acknowledge the elusiveness of the answers.

You could not know me.