
THE INVOLUNTARY MASKS OF THE POET: EXAMINING THE EVOLUTION OF THE POET PERSONA THROUGH P.D. JAMES'S ADAM DALGLIESH

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ABSTRACT

This essay examines historical perspectives of the Poet persona (traditionally defined and articulated by poets themselves) alongside a contemporary depiction of the Poet in the novel-sphere. More specifically, it considers the protagonist from P.D. James's Adam Dalgliesh mysteries (14 novels spanning from 1962 – 2008), as Dalgliesh is the perfect character to analyse in this respect. James's character reflects a notable shift of the persona in the contemporary through a construction that relies upon both personally and publicly constructed features. Dalgliesh exists at the nexus of detective and poet, a contradiction embodied through the dual personas of a professional and celebrity, each of which takes on a life of its own. Because his fame is not of his own making, this raises questions about how this publicly constructed aspect of the Poet persona manifests itself as what Portuguese poet, Fernando Pessoa (2006, p. 273) refers to as the "involuntary masks" of the poet. These "masks" are cultivated beyond Dalgliesh's control and combine with his own strategic maneuvering to illustrate the dual nature of a persona reliant upon constructions of the self that atypically balance both self-defined and publicly constructed features. This essay argues that Dalgliesh thus not only serves as an exemplification of the modern Poet but also reveals those aspects of the Poet persona which have withstood the perceived distortions of time.

KEY WORDS

Poet Persona; Contemporary Poets; Celebrity; Detective Fiction; Adam Dalgliesh

INTRODUCTION

The poet persona (hereafter referred to as the Poet with a capital P) has long been a subject of fascination and debate. From English poet, Sir Philip Sidney's *Defense of Poesy* (1595) to Modernist fragmentation and the Confessional conflation of narrator and poet-self, poets of every era have used a combination of the splintering of language and identity in order to consciously problematize our notions of native language and the unified self (Crawford 2008, p. 64). Interestingly though, the Poet's identity is most commonly conflated with the collective consciousness of a given timeframe or a defined movement during which they lived, whether it be Modern, Harlem Renaissance, New York School, Confessional, the Beats, Language, etc. even though the persona itself endures long past these respective years and often exists as something separate and/ or beyond a poet's written works. This kind of identification is inherently problematic primarily because, as philosopher, Jacques Derrida (1980, p. 61) declares:

Such a 'moment' is no longer a simple moment in the history and theory of literary genres. To treat it thus would in effect implicate one as tributary— whence the strange logic— of something that has in itself constituted a certain [era-specific ...] motif, namely, the teleological ordering of history.

And, although as academics we do this kind of historical ordering all the time for the sake of analysing and communicating the complexities of concurrent thought processes in and through various modes of literature, it is difficult to capture identities in this vein, particularly that of the Poet because of some of the readily identifiable features which have withstood the perceived distortions of time to persist for centuries.

That is to say, over the years, poets themselves have referred to the Poet persona by some pretty lofty monikers: the archaeologist who unearths human history, as Seamus Haney tells us (Stallworthy 1982, p. 174); the prophet who, as William Norman Guthrie explains, “works for the increase of beauty and good” which ultimately leads to joy (1898, p. 403); the historian who “records what’s gone” as W.B. Yeats reminds us in his poem “Fallen Majesty” (1916, line 4); the fool and the priest, Sigurd Burkhardt claims because of his¹ futile insistence upon absolving words of their bondage to meaning (1956, p. 280); the inventor and the teacher, as Percy Bysshe Shelley proclaims in his own *Defence of Poetry* (1909-14, par. 4), who must use language in order to construct new realities and approximate “the agencies of the invisible world.” And, at best the Poet is *all* of these things combined. Unfortunately, however, these designations (either on their own or as grouped traits) may not have any significance in contemporary societies which value fleeting celebrity over the poet’s identity which, T.S. Eliot (2009, p. 9) tells us, is innately tied to his ability to preserve, extend, and improve language itself while raising an awareness of feeling.

Despite poetry’s prevalence in centuries past, the Poet has not held a prominent purpose in society for quite some time, and so there has been little exploration of what the persona has become in the hypermodern. For instance, it is impossible to limit the discussion of the Poet persona to the aforementioned self-designations because conceptions of the Poet as a public figure have shifted over time along with the growing import of celebrity in media-saturated cultures. And, as P. David Marshall et al. (2020, p.31) explain in relation to Erving Goffman’s theories on self-presentation:

The desired responses of others are influenced by the expressions of individuals and the definition of the situation which others formulate enables the individual to influence others to act voluntarily and in accordance with their own plan without conveying impressions of invested interest.

Poets are overtly aware of this sphere of influence in relation to the construction of the Poet persona and intentionally use it to create a uniquely bifurcated identity expressed through various modes of poetic similitude that in turn reflects the very modes of self-presentation that everyone experiences and exhibits. But, what differentiates the Poet persona from the average person is that the modern poet relies upon the forced façade of celebrity as well in order to convey these complexities. In “Supernovas: A Dialectic of Celebrity in Society”, Lenn E. Goodman (2010, p. 515) tells us that “A celebrity’s life is molded— if it is not destroyed— by an ongoing give and take between free actions, unruly passions, and the needs and aspirations, hopes and fears of a public that is itself self-governed or ill-governed, a mob, a market, a voter base, a fan base— the people”, especially in the Arts. The Poet, as with any artist so intent on crafting specified outputs including self-images, must depend upon the more uncontrollable images constructed by the broader public as a means of garnering audience connection. And so, in order to paint an earnest and full portrait of the Poet persona, we must examine not only what

poets are attempting to convey through the persona, but we must also consider the reception and perception of such performances to see which of those intentions remain true for non-poets. In other words, we can, perhaps, gain a better understanding of the Poet persona in the contemporary by examining the intended traits which have remained over an extended period of time in conjunction with those more involuntary traits that have been applied to the persona by those outside of the realm of poetry.

Therefore, this essay examines historical perspectives of the Poet alongside a contemporary depiction of the Poet persona in the novel-sphere. More specifically, it considers the protagonist from P.D. James's Adam Dalgliesh mysteries (14 novels spanning from 1962 – 2008), as Dalgliesh is the perfect character to analyse in this respect because James's depiction of the Poet persona is remarkable for several reasons. Not only does she pick up on the unique nature of the strange balancing act of this persona, but she deftly employs this duality in the construction of her character by making it one of the more valuable aspects of his identity, and thus (wittingly or unwittingly) reflects a notable shift of the persona in the contemporary. As such, Dalgliesh illustrates the dichotomous nature of the Poet persona through a combination of personal and public constructions of the self— inhabiting a unique identity that is both carefully controlled in some respects, yet reliant upon the unpredictable perceptions of others for success. He exists at the nexus of detective and poet— a contradiction embodied through the aforementioned double persona as both professional and celebrity— each taking on a life of its own. “Interestingly, in a time when poets are no longer household names, Dalgliesh’s own poetry is somehow widely read *and* understood. He frequently finds his own books on the shelves of victims and suspects alike, and because of this literary notoriety, others sensationalize his abilities as inspector” as well (Nolan 2018, p. 50). And, like with all poets, while certain facets of Dalgliesh’s professional persona are indeed carefully chosen, his fame itself is not of his own making, and this raises questions about how this publicly constructed aspect of the Poet persona manifests itself as what Portuguese poet, Fernando Pessoa (2006, p. 273) refers to as the involuntary masks of the poet, which are cultivated beyond Dalgliesh’s control “as an articulation of the private self that is expressed through a public individual” (Marshall, et al. 2020, p. 48). And, although James’s character serves as an exemplification of the delicacy of such performances, as they hinge on promotion through what Marshall, et.al. (2020) refer to as ‘mediatization’ in order to exist and persist, ultimately, the traits Dalgliesh exhibits are commensurate with what poets over time have defined as the Poet’s purpose which is inherently steeped in the duality of a composition of individual and social, atypically balancing carefully self-manufactured features along with the uncontrollable prospects of celebrity at various levels.

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES OF THE POET²

In order to fully understand the nature of the Poet persona’s duality, it becomes necessary to first look to poets themselves to see which facets they have intentionally crafted and promoted in relation to the functionality of the role over an extended period of time. And, perhaps it is no surprise that one of the largest continuous debates surrounding poetry, both within and outside the poetic community, has been (and maybe always will be) about the purported purpose of the Poet himself. Although this dispute is fundamentally steeped in the rules of socio-hierarchy, the popular view maintains that poetry serves primarily a social function, in where the Poet becomes a harbinger of political truths and/ or a sage of life’s fundamental wisdoms. But, it has forever been poets themselves (as opposed to society at large) who espouse such designations, and often, through impossibly elevated standards.

As far back as the sixteenth century, we find in the work of English poet, Sir Philip Sidney (1554 - 1586), documented evidence of the writer himself weighing in on the pure righteousness of that role he must fulfil. (*Righteous* because the word “poet” literally means “prophet” or “seer” in Latin, and “maker” or “creator” in Greek.) In the proper spirit of didactic poetry, Sidney proclaims in *The Defense of Poesy*, otherwise known as *An Apology for Poetry* (1595), that the Poet is an ordained instructional leader of ethics both religious and natural, and he further remarks that the Poet has immense potential when this role is properly executed:

Therefore compare we the poet with the historian and with the moral philosopher; and if he go beyond them both, no other human skill can match him. For as for the divine, with all reverence it is ever to be excepted, not only for having his scope as far beyond any of these as eternity exceedeth a moment, but even for passing each of these in themselves. (Sidney 1595, p.14)

And so, Sidney proclaims that the Poet can and does surpass both the historian and the moral philosopher in aim if he is indeed connected to his rightful spiritual purpose and truth— a concept, it is worth noting, that is consistent with Celtic bards of the time and their upper-class counterparts, the *filí* (also meaning “seer”) who were known for using verse as a means of conveying history, genealogy, and sagacity. However, Sidney further breaks down his distinction into three subsets of poets: those who teach predominantly through the translating of God’s will, e.g. “David in his psalms; Solomon in his Song of Songs,” etc. (Sidney 1595, p. 9); the moral poets who impart their knowledge through philosophical matters, e.g. Tyrtæus or Virgil (Sidney 1595, p. 9 – 10); and, those who instruct via the purpose of their verse, e.g. “heroic, lyric, tragic, comic, satiric, iambic, elegiac, pastoral, and certain others” (Sidney 1595, p. 11). By all accounts, the Poet is viewed as an instructor of ethical standards in his chosen mode.

Because religious and moral decrees are inextricably intertwined at the time, Sidney proclaims that the Poet’s purpose is to affirm such ethical edicts through his works. And, more importantly, it is the way in which the Poet does this (through his verse) that makes him unique:

Now for the poet, he nothing affirmeth, and therefore never lieth. For, as I take it, to lie is to affirm that to be true which is false; so as the other artists, and especially the historian, affirming many things, can, in the cloudy knowledge of mankind, hardly escape from many lies. But the poet, as I said before, never affirmeth. The poet never maketh any circles about your imagination, to conjure you to believe for true what he writeth. He citeth not authorities of other histories, but even for his entry calleth the sweet Muses to inspire into him a good invention; in troth, not laboring to tell you what is or is not, but what should or should not be. And therefore though he recount things not true, yet because he telleth them not for true he lieth not. (Sidney 1595, p. 35 - 36)

According to Sidney, the Poet does not lie because he has no need to: the Poet simply reports that which is true. Sidney also conveys that poetry itself (and therefore the Poet) holds the purest intentions of humans, because it/ he acts as an ethical mirror. As T.S. Eliot points out in his 1945 lecture, “The Social Function of Poetry” (2009, p. 4), “giving moral instruction” is, in fact, the main aim of didactic poetry. Part of morality is also an assumed honesty and integrity of the actual words that the writer produces, and the Poet should be a sort of over-reliable narrator of all that is and not just one who simply reports ethically.

It is in this vein that in *The Order of Things* (1970), theorist Michel Foucault advances Eliot’s notions by declaring that the Poet’s fundamental function is principally to use language in order to *find* and *define* similarities between subjects:

At the fringes of a knowledge that separates beings, signs, and similitudes, and as though to limit its power, the madman fulfills the resemblance that never ceases to proliferate. The poet fulfills the opposite function: his is the allegorical role; beneath the language of signs and beneath the interplay of their precisely delineated distinctions, he strains his ears to catch that 'other language', the language, without words or discourse, of resemblance. (Foucault 1994, p. 50)

Foucault asserts that the poet's primary role is to identify and communicate through complex resemblances, and that this is a skill that reaches beyond the confines of those in normal language usage. This concept of similitudes, he later explains, is rooted in the sixteenth-century conventions of discourse more specifically enumerated as *convenientia* (convenience), *aemulatio* (emulation), analogy, and sympathy— all of which must rely on personal experience in order to work (Foucault 1994, p. 25).

Interestingly, however, it is not until the Romantic period, perhaps because of the onset of overt self-reflection and emphasis on the self as subject in one's own writing, that similar sentiments begin to be expressed autobiographically, as is the case in William Wordsworth's life-long work-in-progress, *The Prelude* (1850). And so, what was previously an attention to social order continues, not strictly in the form of religious edicts, but as manifestations of the ethereal as a function of material nature. It is hence revealed to be the Poet's duty to convey the trappings of this complex relationship. In accordance, Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792 – 1822) expresses the superiority of the Poet over all artists when he declares that poets,

are the institutors of laws, and the founders of civil society, and the inventors of the arts of life, and the teachers, who draw certain propinquity with the beautiful and the true that partial apprehension of the agencies of the invisible world. (1840, par. 4).

He sees the Poet as the connective tissue between the natural and immaterial worlds. As Shelley goes on to intimate, through his mastery of language, the Poet must also teach man of his rightful place within these realms and establish the required social order.

Transcendentalist counterparts echo these sentiments as well, as Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803 – 1882), too, hails the Poet as the preeminent expert of language itself:

The sign and credentials of the poet are, that he announces that which no man foretold. He is the true and only doctor; he knows and tells; he is the only teller of news, for he was present and privy to the appearance which he describes. He is a beholder of ideas, and an utterer of the necessary and causal. (Emerson 1844, par. 7)

While many may debate Emerson's claim that the Poet is the *only* messenger of intrinsic veracity, few (then or now) would take issue with his argument that the Poet is a legitimate practitioner of language itself. Emerson goes on to proclaim that the Poet "is apprised of the divineness of this superior use of things, whereby the word is a temple" (1844, p. 5). In other words, he acts as a direct conduit for the divine (presumably through inspiration), and therefore knows truth instantaneously, thus making the Poet's primary job to convey that fidelity to the world at large. In this light, Emerson specifically points to the importance of the decision-making process of poetic writing as an indicator of heavenly connection, as he explains that poets (more than anyone else) must regularly make clear distinctions on the presentation of those utterances put forth because of their weighty import (Emerson 1844, p. 5).

This emphasis on lingual intent as a deific communiqué quickly begins to fade as the imaginative qualities of the self in nature are replaced by Victorian concerns of the “middling condition,” which, according to George Levine (1983, p. 6), “always impl[y] an attempt to use language to get beyond language, to discover some nonverbal truth out there.” Surely though, Levine is not referring to truth in the esoteric sense, but the kind grounded in quantifiable matters invariably steeped in the follies of social systems of all kinds, including those of language as an institution. Consequently, the poets who emerge on the heels of Victorian realism begin to take issue with the earlier inclinations of the Romantic autobiographical “I” and endeavour to break apart those individualistic tendencies that have hitherto been considered naturalistic and/ or inherent; reflection on one’s personal experiences in their terms is no longer enough to achieve poetic paradigms. It remains true, however, that the focus of verse does not immediately shift away from the ‘self’ as a subject. Rather, it skews toward principals of linguistic intent that problematize the identified-self.

It is in this lingual transference that we must concern ourselves with current conceptions of the Poet as persona, because language usage is not the only process that complicates the identification. What has not been broached up until this point is that the Poet must also consciously rectify public and private selves in order to effectively employ his methods of similitude, and poets of various eras have approached this separation of selves in different ways. As noted in “Learning to Circumvent the Limitations of the Written-Self” (Nolan 2015, p. 57), “Early on the Humanists used *imitatio* [loosely described as imitation today] as a way to break away from medieval perceptions of the fixed-self,” and Romantics like Wordsworth (1770 – 1850), “explored written identification through the liminal often intertwining autobiography and mysticism in order to interrogate the relationship of man with the natural and spiritual worlds.” But it was Modernist poets who “mastered the process of poetic fragmentation, or what Maud Ellmann refers to as the poetics of ‘impersonality,’ through their extensive depersonalization of the self [Ellmann 1988, p.4 – 7]” (Nolan 2015, p. 57). In a letter dated 20 January, 1935, Fernando Pessoa (1888 – 1935) explains the art of Modernist poetic fragmentation in the following way:

What I am essentially— behind the involuntary masks of the poet, logical reasoner and so forth— is a dramatist. My spontaneous tendency to depersonalization ... naturally leads to the definition. And so I do not evolve, I simply JOURNEY. (...) I continuously change personality, I keep enlarging (and here there is a kind of evolution) my capacity to create new characters, new forms of pretending that I understand the world or, more accurately that the world can be understood. (2006, p. 273)

While Pessoa is directly referring to his specific brand of heteronymism here, which represents the greatest extreme of Modern fragmentation through 136 personas (or, to use the terminology favoured by Pessoa scholars “fictitious authors”), his radical depersonalization is a perfect example of what every poet must regularly do (although to a lesser extent), as the Poet must create and inhabit various façades in order to convey the many complex ever-changing ways of being we each undergo from moment-to-moment thus definitively making the Poet a dramatist as well. Interestingly though, despite agreement among poets about the pervasiveness of such acts it is not clear if these performances or any of the other aforementioned traits is communicable beyond the Poet’s domain. And so, before we can examine those performances that the Poet crafts and/ or enacts, we must see which of these self-defined characteristics (if any) is recognized by those outside of the realm of poetry and poets.

THE POET AS DETECTIVE

Even though poets have regularly utilized fictionalized masks as a means of individuation and connectivity for years, the Poet as a fully fictional character is an oddly contemporary conception. As previously mentioned, poetry is experiential— the Poet can only convey the complex modes of being inhabited by humanity through the use of similitudes which hinge on personal observation. And so, beyond the strictly autobiographical verse of aforementioned works like Wordsworth's *The Prelude* (finished 1850) and its successor, Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* (finished 1892)— each consisting of multiple editions over time, (re)written as the poets themselves aged— there is a long history of the Poet inserting himself into verse as a character, e.g. William Blake in *Milton* (1804). And, whereas contemporary poets like Audre Lorde (1934 - 1992) regularly blur the lines between reality and fiction in novel-like texts, they too rely heavily upon the autobiographical. (Lorde even refers to her work, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (1982) as "biomythography" because of its intentional genre melding.) And so, in order to get a general perspective of the Poet persona, it seems necessary to look to a writer of fiction who does not consider themselves to be a Poet.

Novelist and non-fiction writer, P.D. James (1920 -) is not a poet— at no point does she claim to cross that line. Therefore, we should be able to get a more objective viewpoint of the dichotomy of the Poet persona through the portrayals of her primary protagonist, Detective Chief-Inspector Adam Dalgliesh. As a character, Dalgliesh is predominantly classified as a gentleman detective: He has great "appreciation for high art, literature, architecture, religious texts, classical music, and good wine, a trait shared with fictional detectives such as Dorothy L. Sayers's Lord Peter Wimsey and Colin Dexter's Inspector Morse" (Nolan 2018, p.49). But, as with all good gentlemen detectives, Dalgliesh possesses a quirky 'hobby' and his happens to be writing verse. He distinctly embodies those aforementioned traits of the Poet as well and in archetypal fashion is described as having a "stern withdrawn self-absorption as if he were stoically enduring a private pain" (James 1994, p. 352). At first glance, this image, commensurate with common perceptions of sensitivity and the 'tortured artist', may seem to be at odds with the more callous depictions we have come to expect of the literary detective. However, the combination of poet and policeman is not as dichotomous as it may seem, especially when we consider how well the pairing expresses the unique duality of the Poet persona itself.

Writing poetry is not a sustainable living, and so poets have long needed to support themselves by other means. Thankfully, some of the aforementioned skills the Poet possesses naturally translate to certain professions, i.e. working on more lucrative forms of writing and/or in education. But, even if as Robert Crawford states (2008, p.200), "Today's poet is more often than not both inside and outside the institutional, academic literary machine, aware ... that frequently the most useful weapons are ones which bear the imprint of the system itself," those modes of similitude that the Poet uses (convenience, emulation, analogy, and sympathy) happen to be extremely useful tools in various legal professions as well. As previously explained, the Poet has always been linked to the communication of ethical standards. And so, while most poets these days may not choose to work directly in law as did American poets Edgar Lee Masters (1868 - 1950) and Wallace Stevens (1879 - 1955), detection is not such a stretch for a paid profession when considering the usefulness of lingual semblance as a skill.

In R. Reid's guidebook on detection, *Every Man His Own Detective* (1887, p.23), he states, "If there is any art that will aid the detective in his profession more than another, it is, *par excellence*, the art of observing," and James clearly sees the connection between this aptitude and the primary job of the Poet as language expert. For this reason, in the first book of the

series, it is established that “Dalgliesh [is] morbidly sensitive to every word” (James 1962, p. 249), and it is this attention to detail which makes him an excellent detective throughout the series. Dalgliesh is careful and precise with the selection of his own words, never allowing them to reveal his personal emotions. Even when he is impatient to move on during an investigation, “neither his words nor his tone” betray him (James 1977, p. 137). And, because every good poet possesses strong recitation skills as well, Dalgliesh naturally boasts total recall of what others say, making it virtually unnecessary for officers attending his preliminary and formal interviews to take notes (James 1977, p. 142). But, as a reminder, Eliot and others tell us the Poet’s purpose is to utilize his mastery of language in order to uncover truths. Dalgliesh frequently assesses the language usage of suspects in this vein and this “[e]vidence so carefully elicited, [is often] vital” to solving a case (James 1977, p. 190). This is particularly evident when he notices the turns of phrase of others and he gets what is referred to as “the frisson of excitement along the blood at the first realization that something important has been said” (James 1975, p. 74). This happens in *Death of an Expert Witness* (1977, p. 225), when after speaking with suspect, Mrs. Schofield, Dalgliesh declares, “I got the impression that there was a small, almost undetectable moment of confusion when she realized that she’d stumbled into saying something indiscreet, or at least something she wished unsaid.” And, these moments, so clearly predicated on his mastery of language, are a part of the controlled mechanism of his persona and also precisely what lead to his professional success.

Dalgliesh’s work with poetics further translates into extraordinary detection, as his lingual abilities also seem to work in the reverse. As with many poets who excel at filling in the blanks when crafting verse, Dalgliesh has an uncanny ability to read between the lines which manifests in several ways and can alter the course of an investigation, because for a literary detective of Dalgliesh’s calibre, it is not “the last piece of the jigsaw, the easiest of all, that [is] most important. No, it is the neglected, uninteresting small segment which, slotted into place, suddenly [makes] sense of so many other discarded pieces” (James 1975, p. 311). And so, when speaking with suspects, Dalgliesh takes just as much notice of the things left unsaid as he does of those which are spoken, because he knows that an un/intentional omission of words can shed light on a given situation or the suspects themselves. There are several examples of this in *The Black Tower* (1975, p. 29, 68) alone, as he is able to ascertain the perceived criminal’s lack of knowledge on a subject because of the omission of a name and date in a poison pen letter, and during a discussion among suspects, he also keenly observes the lack of remarks regarding a victim and his diary.

Beyond Dalgliesh’s lingual dexterities, however, James additionally develops links to those other characteristics which have been attributed to the Poet. Dalgliesh may not be prophetic— a fact made clear when it is stated that “He [is] a professional policeman, not a clairvoyant” (James 1975, p. 250)— but, he easily fulfils the role as teacher; he not only consistently instructs on morals (as is expected from one who upholds the law), but Dalgliesh also imparts wisdom on writing as a craft as well. His advice to a fledgling writer in *Shroud for a Nightingale* (1971, p.276) is as follows: “If you believe that the young and innocent need comfort and protection you’re thinking in clichés. And if you begin by thinking in clichés you end by writing in them.” Moreover, the detective is naturally an archaeologist and historian, because like the Poet who often exhumes “heroic figures’ and/ or ‘equate[s] his subject with some larger figure from antiquity, so that the lustre of the old is transmitted to the new” (Stallworthy 1982, p. 172), the detective must resurrect the experiences of the dead and reconstruct events of the past by piecing together seemingly disparate clues in the present. In fact, James writes, “It [is] the strangest part of a detective’s job, this building up of a relationship with the dead, seen only as a crumpled corpse at the scene of crime or naked on the mortuary table” (1977, p. 92). Yet, Dalgliesh excels at it, primarily because he always has one foot in the

past himself, and even then, he unmistakably exemplifies the contemporary shift of the Poet persona. This can be seen in *The Black Tower* (1975, p.27) when Dalgliesh reflects on a subject he has long struggled with as a result of his father's position as a rector in a Norfolk county parish: "The spiritual life. It was a phrase he had often heard on the lips of his father's more ultra mundane parishioners although never on the Canon's own. He had occasionally tried to visualize this mysterious other existence." But the deeper meaning ultimately evades him, as Dalgliesh is thoroughly modern and thus lacks a basic understanding of the spiritual despite his role as Poet and/ or his own father's position within the church. That is to say, he may use religious knowledge in order to inform his writing or policework, but he does not rely upon such strictures for intent or inspiration, thus replicating a pattern among real-life poets working within the post-Romantic rebuff of previously assumed conceptions of divine intervention. And so, Dalgliesh's character is reminiscent of poets like William Blake (1757 – 1827) who parodied the constructs of poetic proselytization in order to express Romantic ideals through his work *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1790 – 1793), or more so, W.B. Yeats (1865 – 1939) who grappled with spirituality through his poetry as a result of his own father's position in the church.

With that said, even those traits of the Poet which we can see have remained relevant through Dalgliesh as a character (language expert, archaeologist/ historian, and teacher) have possibly become under-appreciated by society at large. Therefore, we must also examine how the masks of celebrity relate to Dalgliesh, because it is only through the lens of dramatic performance that we can begin to understand the contemporary elements of fame and the implications of celebrity that are infused in the Poet persona on which he is based.

THE POET AS PERFORMER

As previously mentioned, the poet's persona relies on two distinct presentations (formed personally and through societal judgements), and those attributes which have been publicly constructed are, in many ways, directly related to the role of the Poet as a performer. As T.S. Eliot explains in his essay, "The Three Voices of Poetry" (1953), the Poet is most certainly a dramatist, and this is particularly evident when evaluating how poets regularly shift between three voices:

The first voice is the voice of the poet talking to himself— or to nobody. The second is the voice of the poet addressing an audience, whether large or small. The third is the voice of the poet when he attempts to create a dramatic character speaking in verse; when he is saying, not what he would say in his own person, but only what he can say within the limits of one imaginary character addressing another imaginary character. (2009, p.96)

Eliot's explanation of poetic exposition through several distinct voices demonstrates the extent to which *all* poets, and not just those who attacked poetic duality with an unmatched ferocity as did the Modernists, are dramatic players applying various masks without much conscious effort, and it is this very combination that underpins Pessoa's use of the term "involuntary masks". We could also add a fourth voice to Eliot's definition, as we must consider the oral recitation of poetic works regardless of which written method is employed, especially because there is such an extended tradition of spoken verse.

Poets since the first century, like Roman poet Marcus Annaeus Lucanus (a.k.a. Lucan, 39 – 65 CE), were considered prominent public figures because they used recitations and dramatic performances not only to entertain but to share the state of the republic and its people. Likewise, the appeal of the aforementioned sixteenth-century bards was rooted in their

entertainment value. However, because of a post-Poundian insistence upon viewing poetry as elitist and/ or antiquated that has been compounded by existing norms of lingual designation and the ways in which people (particularly Westerners) have come to value identities, the Poet no longer holds privileged status among the masses. Still, as Crawford (2008, p. 67) explains, the Poet attempts “to address or gesture towards a cultural wholeness whose loss the poet fears. The fragment [or performative mask] as a remnant of the earlier civilization is an emblem both of destruction and continuity.”

So, while for centuries the mechanisms by which the Poet operates have not changed, there has been a definitive reconstruction of the persona in relation to what Marshall et al. (2020, p. 2) tell us is “the formation of the contemporary self [which] is now constructed and displayed through technologies and forms of expression that express media forms.” Subsequently, the Poet as public performer has become hopelessly intertwined with contemporary conceptions of celebrity. It is overtly telling, for instance, that in the United States the general population appears to be interested in the fact that Amanda Gorman, the first National Youth Poet Laureate, received a modelling contract after her reading at the 46th President’s inauguration than in her written identity— a fascination evinced by Gorman’s recent appearance in the fashion magazine, *Vogue* (St. Felix 2021). The role of the Poet too has become unrealistically romanticized in ways that unjustly harken back to those times when it was more performance based, and this has been noted for quite some time. For instance, W.H. Auden (1962, p. 451 – 452) comically notes the number of young people who regularly claim interest in writing solely because “they are under the illusion that in that profession they will be able to create; even if their genuine desire is to make money” and “[w]hat is surprising is that such a high percentage of those without any marked talent for any profession should think of writing as a solution.” The attraction of the Poet then, as with the musician, actor, socialite, influencer, and the like, is rooted in the belief that he has somehow managed to side-step the necessity of “a lifetime of meaningless labor” (Auden 1962, p. 452). But, as previously stated, contemporary poets do, in fact, work, and so it becomes necessary to evaluate the public perception of the Poet’s performance instead.

Thus, when examining Dalgliesh as an exemplification of the Poet, we must also consider the more public presentations of his identity. It is made clear throughout the series that Dalgliesh is well-known as a writer and that his poetry is widely read. And, although it is never fully explained how this strange phenomenon has occurred in an age when poets are not generally known to the public, we are led to believe that as an intensely private individual, Dalgliesh would have had to rely upon the marketing savvy of an agent and/or publisher in order to build an audience that seems to span class, age, gender, and other demographic divides that most living poets would struggle to capture. That is to say, while Dalgliesh represents a celebrity status that most poets never achieve— he is undoubtedly akin to iconic poets like Allen Ginsberg (1926 – 1997) in this respect— James’s decision to write this level of prestige into her character highlights the very necessity of community buy-in for the Poet persona even though, in reality, the level of success is relative and varies by individual.

As a character continuously developed between 1962 – 2008, Dalgliesh also reflects a media influence on the persona that has only existed for the post-nineteenth century Poet. With that said, James’s lack of explanation for his popularity may make his reach as Poet seem unbelievable to a general readership, especially as it relates to the integrity of his production. As T.S. Eliot asserts in his essay, “The Social Function of Poetry” (1957):

[I]f a poet gets a large audience very quickly, that is a rather suspicious circumstance: for it leads us to fear that he is not really doing anything new, that

he is only giving people what they are already used to, and, therefore what they have already had from the poets of the previous generation ... For the greatest poets have aspects which do not come to light at once; and by exercising a direct influence on other poets centuries later, they continue to affect the living language. (Eliot 2009 11)

Eliot would say that for a modern poet, James's protagonist has a suspiciously large following indeed, and as the poetic equivalent of a pop star on the verge of the digital age³, he is probably not good enough to have any lasting effect on other writers thereafter. However, James's choice to give Dalgliesh icon status twice over— not only is he well-known for his writing, but he is also referred to as Scotland Yard's 'Wonder Boy' because of his exemplary "record of solving high profile cases" (Nolan 2018, p.49)— seems to further cement the importance of fame in modern cultures while simultaneously epitomizing the belief that true success can only come with a certain level of notoriety. Interestingly though, Dalgliesh is not necessarily surprised nor is he overly pleased when someone recognizes him or when he finds his own works on random bookshelves during an investigation. Nevertheless, this celebrity often affords him the connections needed to employ poetic similitude as a detective, and perhaps this is why Dalgliesh acknowledges the symbiotic nature of this pairing in *Shroud for a Nightingale* (1971, pp. 202) when he declares, "I've never thought of poetry and police work as needing to be reconciled in that ecumenical way."

As with poetic similitude, the performative mask comes in handy in detection, as it takes a good persona to know one. Dalgliesh immediately recognizes a well-rehearsed bit and this is demonstrated throughout the series. In *The Black Tower* (1975, p. 35), for instance, Dalgliesh notes that a suspect's "outburst had been less than spontaneous, the protest had been made before. It sounded like a ritual justification and he suspected that someone had helped her with the script." He similarly identifies another suspect's ploy in *Shroud for a Nightingale*:

Dalgliesh wondered whether [Miss Martha Collins's] acidulated tone and perversely unattractive appearance were part of a calculated persona. Perhaps some forty years earlier she has decided to become a hospital character, the beloved tyrant of fiction, treating everyone from the matron to the Junior maid with equal irreverence, and had found the characterization so successful and satisfying that she had never managed to drop it. (James 1971, p. 150)

This observation of Dalgliesh's that a person might adopt the performative mask permanently if/ when it is met with success is completely ironic considering the same could be said of the Poet. In other words, Dalgliesh is himself a direct example of the primary issue that poets face as a result of adopting a celebrity persona, as the involuntary masks are in fact a double-edged sword— they may allow Dalgliesh/ the Poet to be seen by a wider audience as "expert" and therefore help him to achieve a certain level of success (while still living), but as Eliot tells us, such public personas, so clearly cultivated beyond his control also limit his ability to disseminate deeper truths and/ or make a lasting effect on those thereafter because of their tenuousness.

CONCLUSION

While the Poet persona has been well documented for centuries, it is evident that not all of the characteristics which have traditionally been defined, articulated, and valued by poets themselves have endured in modern societies. For instance, through P.D. James's Detective Chief-Inspector Adam Dalgliesh, we can see that while (for the time being) the Poet has moved away from the previously assumed religious tenets of divine intervention and deific prophecy,

the persona is still clearly synonymous with the archaeologist/ historian, teacher, dramatist, performer, and most importantly, language expert, as each of these designations ultimately shares the same function— to dispense truths of the human condition.

That is to say, the Poet's role is and always has been to espouse the fact that beyond the copious façades we strive to construct, there are inalienable experiences we share as humans. This is one of the reasons why the Poet persona must be dual in its construction, accounting for and relying upon both personally and publicly constructed features. And, while language may be an insufficient means of expressing these likenesses, it is the best method we have for communicating the many complex modes of being we inhabit. The Poet is responsible for reminding us of this through his use of similitude, but unfortunately, the very constructions of celebrity which enable some poets to reach a greater audience, particularly in today's media saturated cultures, often obscure that objective because such notoriety feeds off of the focus on the façade itself. Perhaps that is why Eliot tells us that any poet worth his salt should not be a celebrity in modern terms, at least not unless widespread recognition comes posthumously (Eliot 2009, p. 11). But, in these terms, if the Poet's purpose is best fulfilled among the people— out on the street or on the café stage, working as a teacher, lawyer, or even, like Dalgliesh, as a detective— the reality is that the persona may be best expressed digitally these days, because increasingly people connect using online platforms. And so, Eliot's statement itself is a relic of time— Instapoets, or those poets who present their works via Instagram and/ or other social media are here to stay, and their highly controlled virtual presentations of the self are involuntary in other ways, as they rely upon a more specified community buy-in than poets of the past through features such as likes, comments, subscriptions, and shares. Through these social media platforms, it is not unusual for “a shared image [or poem to be] hashtagged with multiple and not-always-relevant hashtags in order to attract more views and likes and thereby give an impression to a social circle of being more popular and successful” (P. David Marshall, et al. 2020, p.32). Thus, it would seem that the Poet persona, as an ever-evolving identity steeped in a distinctive duality that hinges on public conceptions just as much as it does on personal intentionality must adapt along with technologies and conceptions of celebrity in order to persist whether or not it remains relevant at large.

END NOTES

1. I am using primarily masculine pronouns for the Poet throughout only because the majority of the poets I discuss herein are male. There is no intended connotation for this choice.
2. The analysis in this section is by no means exhaustive in nature, as it is primarily meant as a general survey of poets' views on the role of the Poet over an extended period of time. Those looking for a more comprehensive information on the subject may look to either T.S. Eliot's *On Poetry and Poets* (2009) and/ or John Carey's *A Little History of Poetry* (2020).
3. This is not to be confused with those poets who were pop star equivalents in pre-digital eras, as the celebrity of poets like Lord Byron (1788 – 1824), Oscar Wilde (1854 – 1900), and the like differs greatly from those who exist in modern media-saturated societies where presentations of the self are inherently intertwined with digital presentation and promotion.

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