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Other People Do, in Fact, Exist: Richard Howard's Epistolary Strategies[1]

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Esteemed American poet and translator Richard Howard (1929–2022) won the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry in 1970 for his groundbreaking book *Untitled Subjects*, a collection of dramatic monologues with the epistolary mode at its center. Originally and most deeply indebted to the dramatic monologues of Robert Browning, Howard's work is also heavily influenced by novels in the great European tradition, by his deep immersion in European history, and by European literary culture in general. Howard's witty, learned, ingenious persona poems advance the art of the epistolary in significant ways. For one, they demonstrate that a writer can establish his own idiosyncratic voice by assuming the voices of others. Moreover, Howard's concentration on personas constitutes a counterbalance to the predominance of the Confessional mode in American poetry, highlighting the significance of his achievement. *Untitled Subjects*, published in 1969, arrived precisely at the time when the Confessional rose to prominence. As the tide of Confessional poets swept across the American literary landscape–carrying along with it its often-frivolous devotion to the contemporary, especially American popular culture–Howard's poems relentlessly explore the lives of important figures of the nineteenth century and are unapologetically enamored of European high culture. Richard Howard's poetry constitutes a rebuttal of Confessionalism, to wit, that "other people do in fact exist."
Keywords: Richard Howard, persona poem, epistolary poetry, Confessional poetry, Wallace Stevens.

The particular subject of this conference – "Letters" – gives me the opportunity to speak on a contemporary American poet I have long admired, Richard Howard (1929–2022), master of both the persona poem and the epistolary and winner of the Pulitzer Prize for his third full volume, *Untitled Subjects*. He was also an award-winning translator from the
French, a teacher–at the end of his career, Professor Emeritus at Columbia University–a
long-serving poetry editor of *The Paris Review* and many other journals, and a noted critic of art and literature.

My title is inspired by a remark in Richard Howard's "Foreword" to Stephen McLeod's poetry volume *The Borgo of the Holy Ghost*. In the book, McLeod follows somewhat in Howard's own footsteps by treating a wide range of subjects rather than just his own biography, that is, by eschewing the Confessional mode, the "poet's personal testimonial" approach, that had come to dominate American poetry. One of the remarkable things about Richard Howard was the breadth of his literary interests. Unlike many mid-or late-career artists who find it necessary to disavow all artistic visions varying from

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their own, Richard Howard always demonstrated a talent for recognizing talent in others, whatever their artistic mode. In his criticism, he mostly refrained from attacking confessionalists for their confessionalism. Thus, when I encountered this remark –"McLeod is a worldly poet – he believes other people exist" (ix-x)–it struck me that here at last was a fairly direct and succinct confession of Howard's own, revealing at least one opinion he had harbored about the so-called Confessional mode: it seems to discount the reality that other people do, *in fact*, exist.

The very title of Howard's volume of selected poems, *Inner Voices*, which came out in 2004, is an indication that his work in this *me! me! me!* period of American poetry has represented something else, an exploration of other voices, but also a way to explore the self by registering that we are all made up of other voices. I'm reminded of the title of a poem by the American poet, and Howard's near contemporary, Charles Wright, "Poem Almost Wholly in My Own Manner," which, in addition to being an acknowledgment that poems even by late-career poets are always at least partially responses to other poems and other poets, is also a recognition in a roundabout way that we are all made up of other manners, other voices. We are all polyglot.

Perhaps Confessional poets would have it differently. Confessionalism began with Robert Lowell's groundbreaking book *Life Studies*, published in 1959, in which Lowell (a) removed the mask of the disinterested third-person speaker so favored by the so-called New Critics of the Transatlantic, and (b) spoke openly about the anguish and psychic pain of his own life. Soon after its publication, M. L. Rosenthal published a review of *Life Studies*, entitled "Poetry as Confession," which first applied the term "Confessional" to Lowell's new approach. Whatever we might say about *Life Studies*, there can be no denying it has been one of the most influential books in twentieth-century American poetry.

A number of poets quickly became identified with the Confessional school. In addition to Robert Lowell, there was also, of course, Sylvia Plath, whose poem "Daddy" has become the poster child for the Confessional mode. Her friend and fellow poet Anne Sexton also quickly became famous for adopting the Confessional approach, as did W.D. Snodgrass. After that, it was a land rush, such that we can safely say Confessional poetry dominated American verse for the next fifty years to the degree that it became synonymous with American poetry itself. It became the rule in American poetry, and, generally speaking, poets writing outside the Confessional mode were the exception.[2]

Ten years into the Confessional revolution came what we might now refer to as the first counter-revolution–Richard Howard's *Untitled Subjects*, published in 1969. It is a book made up entirely of long, allusive, chatty, and densely packed persona poems in the voices of figures from nineteenth-century history. I'll give you a sense of the range of those figures in a moment, but for now let me just say that the originality and boldness of Howard's book was immediately recognized by his contemporaries, one of them being W.H. Auden, who presided over the three-member Pulitzer Prize committee that year and awarded it to *Untitled Subjects*.

Following the success of that volume Richard Howard published a dozen full-length collections,[3] stretching from 1971's *Findings* all the way up to *A Progressive Education* in 2014, all of which extend

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[2] It should be admitted that though American poets not writing in the Confessional mode are the exceptions, some exceptions other than Richard Howard are also certainly notable, John Ashbery, for instance, who has had a considerable influence on the avant-garde in American poetry and is considered by many the most important American poet of his generation; Mark Strand, who eschewed the Confessional in favor of a stripped down surrealism; Susan Howe, who is associated with Language poetry; Rae Armantrout, who practices a kind of surrealist minimalism; a few poets who have made their names writing concrete poetry; and more recently an emerging host of erasure poets. These are just a few prominent examples.

[3] Those twelve volumes are, in chronological order:
Findings (1971)
Two-Part Inventions (1974)
Fellow Feelings (1976)
Misgivings (1979)
Lining Up (1984)
No Traveller (1989)

and expand upon the "other voices" approach. Unlike books by any other lyric poet working in America in the latter half of the twentieth century and the first decades of the twenty-first, a book of poems by Richard Howard constitutes a relatively small number of dauntingly long, multipage poems in the assumed voices of pretty much anyone other than the poet himself.

Often, a Richard Howard poem creates a long snaky image on the page – page after page – because of his combined use of complicated patterns of indention and his chosen verse form, syllabics. This latter element is in itself a profound departure from convention with respect to American poetry. Howard, writing right through the heyday of free verse, countered not only that trend but differed even from other formalist poets writing in English in that he did not write accentual-syllabic verse. Rather, like his beloved French poets, and like the idiosyncratic American modernist poet Marianne Moore – whose poems, graphically, Howard's somewhat resemble – from the beginning of his career Howard chose to write in syllabics.

Because of their length, density, and allusiveness, Richard Howard's poems require of the reader, in addition to a great deal of patience, a deep understanding of European history, American history, American middle-brow and high-brow culture of the early and mid-twentieth century, and a deep understanding of transatlantic literary culture. This went on for some five decades, and having spoken to the poet myself a few years before his death in 2022, I can tell you that it went on for as long as he wrote poetry: as late as the age of 87 Richard Howard was still producing new work and hoped to publish another volume.

Because of his exploration of the dramatic monologue Howard has been called "America's Browning," and certainly he was heavily influenced by Robert Browning, as well as by Tennyson. He also absorbed a great deal from Elizabeth Bishop's own forays into the persona poem like "Crusoe in England" and "From Trollope's Journal" (itself an example of a poem in the epistolary mode), poems Howard very much admired by a poet he knew personally and considered a central figure in twentieth-century American poetry.

But Howard's much longer, more concentrated engagement with the persona poem led him into new territories, going far beyond the work in personas we see in his precursors. For example, he did a good deal more with the epistolary poem – the poem made up of made-up documents. Letters, yes, but other types as well. And in fact, the kinds of persona poems Howard wrote, even when they were not strictly epistolary – dramatic monologues, for instance, in which the reader is invited to eavesdrop on one side of a conversation between a speaker and his or her interlocutor; and soliloquys, in which the reader is allowed to overhear what a speaker in solitude says to him- or herself – are I think very akin to the epistolary. Just as the epistolary novel is a way of delivering the narrative through indirection and a kind of detective work by first author, then reader; the long persona poem à la Richard Howard is a way of delivering the lyric poem indirectly, of giving us images and charged language, for instance, at the same time it's allowing us to take part in the Robert Browning game of seeing character revealed as if inadvertently.

But many of the poems are epistolary in the stricter sense of that term. For instance, the first poem in *Untitled Subjects*, entitled "Among the Papers of the Envoy to Constantinople," purports to be a letter from the scene painter Philippe-Jacques de Loutherbourg to Lord Elgin. The next, "A Message to Denmark Hill," constitutes a letter to his father by the famous nineteenth-century Englishman John Ruskin, written while on his honeymoon in Italy. In all, six of the fifteen poems in *Untitled Subjects* are strictly epistolary–three are letters; two, diary entries; one, a business proposal.

It's a pattern Howard would follow in all his subsequent books – that is, of having among a series of persona poems a smattering of poems in the strictly epistolary mode; mostly letters, some diary

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Like Most Revelations (1994)
Trappings (1999)
Talking Cures (2002)
The Silent Treatment (2005)
Without Saying (2008)
A Progressive Education (2014).

entries, some other kinds of documents including made up program notes for a classical music concert, exhibition notes for a gallery opening, at least one that features a letter embedded in a dramatic monologue, minutes of a meeting of the Acquisitions Committee of the Bodleian Library, and a whole series of poems written in the last ten to fifteen years of his career which comprise letters written by schoolchildren to their fifth-grade teacher while on school field trips.

Having spent a portion of my early career working in the persona, I have come to conclusion that, to my mind, this kind of poem tries to accomplish at least three things: produce a successful impersonation, reveal character, and provide the pleasures we typically expect from lyric poetry. Significantly, it tries to accomplish the first two and still deliver the third. With regard to the first, the poem has to persuade the reader to willingly suspend disbelief. Second, and especially in the wake of Browning's famous monologues such as "My Last Duchess" and "Porphyria's Lover," it has become part of the game that persona poems reveal something about their subjects those subjects would not otherwise have been willing to disclose, as if they are giving up something of themselves without realizing they are doing so. Last, and perhaps most challengingly, the poem should be a poem. That is, while accomplishing the first two goals and oftentimes in spite of the restrictions on lyricism they might impose, the poem should still be a kind of song. The language of the poem should still be its primary reason for being. Readers should be able to expect from the persona poem many of the same pleasures derived from the short personal lyric, even if brevity isn't one of them.

In his best persona poems, Richard Howard succeeded at achieving all three goals. Whether the speaker is a historical figure like Sir Walter Scott –

I have all my life regretted I did not keep
A journal, regular to the day;
That such custom of a diary
Might make me wiser or better I dare not say,
And must not over-puff
My little collection of curiosities–
With all his talents, Horace Walpole
Makes a silly figure when he gives
Upholsterer's catalogues of Strawberry Hill–
("1825," *Untitled Subjects*)

or fictional characters like a group of American schoolchildren –

Dear Mrs. Masters, Hi! all over again
from the Fifth-Grade Class of Park School. We're home now
from New York City
where we found out how to balance the neck with
the tail of our model Diplodocus, from
the head curator
of the Natural History Museum
(we can do it with a swivel, just the way
they do–he showed us!)
("School Days," *Without Saying*)

we never have difficulty in going along with the game, and seldom even wonder – with regard to a particular phrase or line – if our supposed speaker could be supposed to say such a thing. We are generally willing to suspend our disbelief, to give the poet the benefit of the doubt that, yes, this is indeed whoever it's supposed to be that's talking – or, as the case may be, writing.

Likewise, that the poem reveals something worthwhile, interesting, *revealing* about the speaker can always be counted upon. The poems are chatty and gossipy, but Howard seems always to have his

eye on the ball (literally oftentimes, as there is a lot about festivity in these poems, as well as a lot about sex, a lot of sexual innuendo; the *double entendre* is more than just a specialty for this poet; it's *de rigueur*). The attempt in every poem is to get at what is essential about the person, as if, having immersed himself in the research – the biographies of the historical figures he chooses as the speakers of his poems, for instance, or of the historical figures his invented ones are speaking about – Howard the poet says to his reader, "Here is what I find interesting about this figure and that I hope you might find interesting too, and here as well is what this particular person has to tell us about what it means to be human. Here, at granular level, is the grain of truth from the very grain of experience of this person's life."

Whether or not the poems provide the pleasures of lyric is a matter of taste. And let me be absolutely candid here: I have no doubt that among contemporary American readers of lyric poetry the subgroup comprising those who either cannot find a way to engage with Richard Howard's poetry, or are simply left cold by it, or who absolutely abhor it, is likely a very large group. Conversely, I do find his poems interesting, in fact delightful, and absolutely worthwhile – that is, well worth the effort required of reading them. I feel that they entertain as well as instruct.

The British poet Philip Larkin – who famously gave up his career as a writer of prose fiction after publishing only two novels, then dedicated the rest of his writing career to poetry — remarked at one point that "Novels are about other people and poems are about yourself" (qtd. in Oates). Because of his somewhat curious history as a writer and because he turned out to be one of the most important English-language poets of the twentieth century, that comment from Philip Larkin has always struck me as worth considering. It's pretty monumental, really. But in the case of Richard Howard's poetry a curious thing happens on the way to the forum. On the surface it would seem that Richard Howard is the exception to the rule: his poetry *is* about other people – and in fact, with respect to the first part of Larkin's formulation, that "Novels are about other people," Howard's poems are informed by prose fiction a great deal, especially European fiction of the nineteenth century, a focus of both his reading and scholarship and of his work as a translator from the French. We might see his poems as merely fictions in verse form. But what the deeper immersion in Howard's poetry reveals is that in fact they *are* about the poet himself. The primary character revealed here is the character of Richard Howard. What the poems put on display are *his* interests, *his* inclinations, and, ultimately, *his* essence, *his* inner self; in fact, even *his* language, right down to his verbal ticks, all the punning and wordplay, even the habits of mind that deep analysis of style reveals about the author. It's all about Richard Howard all the time. He's like a great comic impersonator: when he does an impression, we immediately recognize his skill at capturing the person, and at the same time we never lose sight of the person doing the impersonation. It's the comic who entertains us, charms us, draws us in, not the person the comic is mimicking.

Perhaps one of the best ways to demonstrate this is by looking at one of Richard Howard's most well-known poems, "Even in Paris," from the volume *No Traveller*, published in 1989. The poem's ostensible subject is the poet Wallace Stevens, one of the most important American poets of the modernist period and another favorite of Richard Howard. Stevens was born in 1879 and died in 1955. He was one of the most cultured poets in American literary history, fluent in French and German, well-versed in Latin and Greek. He was educated at Harvard and New York University, became a lawyer, and famously spent most of his working life as a vice president of The Hartford insurance company. Also, famously, and ironically, Stevens only traveled outside the United States on one or two occasions and never traveled to Europe. His work was absolutely steeped in European culture, and he once said that he felt that at some point English and French become the same language. He also said he never intended to travel to France because, having spent so much of his life imagining the place, the real thing could never live up to his expectations. Richard Howard, on the other hand, traveled to France numerous times throughout his adult life, and in fact spent a year in Paris as a student at the Sorbonne in 1953 and '54 – the last years of Wallace Stevens's life (again, Stevens died in 1955), and at the point in Stevens's career when, finally, he was recognized as one of the greatest American poets of his generation. So, in the poem, Richard Howard imagines that Wallace Stevens actually made a clandestine trip to Paris that no one in the literary world knew about, and he – that is the young Richard Howard, about twenty-four years old – discovered him at a musical performance at Sainte Chapelle and spent the next several days serving as his tour

guide. Of course we know that none of this could have really happened, but that does not diminish the fun. The poem is strictly in the epistolary mode and comprises a series of letters – some from a figure known only as Ivo, the others in the voice of a figure named "Richard" we assume is the poet himself. All the letters are addressed to a mutual friend named "Roderick" who has had to return from Paris to his hometown of Schenectady, New York.

The poem offers innumerable pleasures, not the least of them that it allows readers to imagine Wallace Stevens doing this thing he famously never did and to imagine someone of Howard's own literary generation getting to spend time one-on-one with the great Wallace Stevens, and in such an inspiring place as Paris at that. It offers many other pleasures as well, for instance, the snarky Ivo referring to Stevens – famous poet of "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" – as "none / other than the Fourteenth way of Looking at / a Bleak Bard" (*No Traveller* 7). The poem puts into Stevens's mouth many amusing remarks. For instance, when asked if Mrs. Stevens – with whom Wallace Stevens notoriously had a terrible relationship – was accompanying him, Richard Howard has Stevens reply, "No. Journeys taken together lead to hell" (11), and when asked whether he intended to "go on to visit Italy. . . . 'I think not. Italians are only the French / in a good mood'" (9–10).

The poem also has moments of real transcendence. One comes when we see Wallace Stevens – famous for his love of beauty and for such wonderful poems as "The Pleasures of Merely Circulating" ("The garden flew round with the angels, / The angels flew round with the clouds, / And the clouds flew round, and the clouds flew round, / And the clouds flew round with the clouds. . . . ") asking to be alone with Monet's water lilies in the Orangerie. The fictionalized young Richard Howard tells us by way of a letter to Roderick that he couldn't resist sneaking a peek: "mine was the backward glance of Orpheus," he says, "or of Lot's wife, the unretarding gaze / that loses the beloved where last seen." What he sees is Stevens

> slowly, in a sort of demonic shuffle
> turning, turning round the oval room,
>
> palms out and humming harshly to himself–
> it was, I could tell, a ritual exploit
> danced by the world's most deliberate dervish. (*No Traveller* 13)

In "Even in Paris," Richard Howard indulges in one of his major preoccupations – imagining the lives of great artists, in this case, mostly Wallace Stevens, but also Poulenc, Monet, and even Walt Whitman. Indeed, a French translation of *Leaves of Grass* becomes a featured part of this long poem when the fictional version of Richard Howard takes the fictional Wallace Stevens to the bookstalls along the quay and Stevens finds and purchases a copy, then pays to have a street urchin toss it into the Seine –"as if it were a Hindu barge" (*No Traveller* 24) – to watch it float momentarily, then sink. Howard also has a good deal of fun at his *own* expense. For instance, his speaker Ivo refers to him as "bald Richard" (5), remarks about his French that it was "like worms on the lawn, coming in and out" (5), describes his conversational style with the great poet he's encountered as "hissing interrogations in that way he has / of answering them himself" (6), and depicts the young Richard Howard's attentions upon the older admired poet as fawning and obsequious. To his credit, these self-effacements come off not as examples of false modesty but as candid, clear-eyed self-reflection – and appropriately, given Howard's penchant for impersonation, self-reflection delivered through the supposed voice of someone else, even though, as I'm arguing here, in his own voice all along.

But "Even in Paris" supports that thesis and reveals the real subject of all Richard Howard's poems in several very direct ways. One is that two of these five letters are in the voice of an invented character we have not much heard from in Richard Howard's body of work: a poet *named* Richard Howard. Another represents what this imagined encounter with Wallace Stevens ultimately amounts to: an opportunity for Howard to voice through an admired figure his own assertions about art, beauty, history, human relationships, the self, and to have those assertions be not only true to himself but true to his own

understanding of this particular admired figure – Wallace Stevens – which he has acquired through strenuous reading, research, and contemplation. As an example, note that fittingly Richard Howard, who has devoted so much of his own poetical cannon to celebrating and re-enlivening the great artists of the past, has Wallace Stevens, the great high-modernist poet, remark about the bookstalls containing so many volumes of canonical literature,

> The future of the past is never sure.
> This must be the one place in the world
> where a man can realize what he writes
>
> is a river too. It is continuous,
> no burden on the memory, but a way
> – made up of all ways–of reaching the sea. (23)

And apropos of his – Richard Howard's – own proclivities as a poet, he has Stevens say "other lives, inveterately appeal– / call to me" (26).

Certainly I am not the first to come to such a conclusion about Richard Howard. For instance, Trevor A. Sydney, writing in *Encyclopedia of Contemporary LGBTQ*, makes the following statement regarding Howard's poetic strategies:

> Some readers may view such extended and frequent poetic masquerades…
> as an elaborate attempt to submerge, even conceal, his own subjectivity.
> That he largely eschews the autobiographical-confessional stance . . .
> certainly reinforces such a perception. However, Howard's penchant for
> adopting the voices of other artists may indeed be an attempt to inscribe
> his own selfhood in a subtle yet powerful way. (Sydney 318)

And the critic Jerome Mazzaro puts it like this: "Rejecting, thus, 'confessional poetry' and the world of 'fact' or science with their ultimate appeals to Narcissism and Spencerian 'survival of the fittest,' Howard turns to poetic impersonation and 'matter'–the substance of human imagination–as the preservers of feeling" (159).

Richard Howard was born on October 13, 1929, and soon after was adopted by a wealthy Jewish family in Cleveland who encouraged his interest in the arts. I asked him once how he first fell in love with the nineteenth century. He told me his grandfather had had a great library chockfull of nineteenth-century European literature, and that as a child he was given complete run of it. Still, Cleveland, Ohio, is a pretty provincial place – a working-class city of the Upper Midwest. He graduated from its Shaker Heights High School in 1947, enrolled in Columbia University in New York, and never returned except for brief visits. "You left Ohio immediately after high school?" I asked. "Oh, yes," he said, "I fled." On yet another occasion he happened to be relating to me that as a kindergarten student at The Park School in Shaker Heights, at naptime the teacher used to read to them. "There were two kinds of books we could choose for her to read to us," he said, "real life or maple leaf – or at least that's what it sounded like to me when the teacher said 'make believe.' So, I always chose 'maple leaf,'" he said, "and I still like it as a term for that."

Do these facts have any bearing on Richard Howard's becoming one of the primary counter-insurgents of American poetry during the Confessional revolution? I think they very well might. An adopted child whose own identity is thus somewhat in question. Adoptive parents who doted on the child and "inculcated in him," as the critic Sydney puts it, a love of the arts (318). A vast, mostly unused library as his own playroom. An early series of happy experiences with "maple leaf." I think it's possible that these are the very things that made Richard Howard the poet he is, a master of the epistolary poem and as such the creator of a body of work as individual as any in American poetry.

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