

# LESLIE ULLMAN

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## Introduction to **The “Personal” Poem as Sacred Space**

By Leslie Ullman

Poets have conceived their poems from personal, deeply interior spaces throughout the ages, as in most of the poetry defined as “lyric.” Yet the word “personal” has become a minefield in the realm of contemporary critical discourse, linked as it is with the Confessional Movement of the 1960’s, whose impulses were originally liberating but now, in many respects, appear tiresome. The refined bravery of Lowell and Snodgrass, and the more explosive revelations of Plath, Berryman, Sexton, and Ginsberg, drove a wedge against the formal distancing, the taste for orderly surfaces that had reigned over American poetry all the way through the 1950’s despite the influence of Whitman and Williams. The work of these first Confessional poets gave subsequent generations of writers permission to *not* disguise the self, to *not* mute strong feeling, and thus to put a great deal of newly available energy into exploring the self as a legitimate frontier. Their work also helped set the stage for explorations of organic form, the subconscious, and untapped aspects of uniquely American life and landscape, all of which characterized much of the poetry written throughout the 1960’s and remain the legacy of that decade. Understandably, however, the landscape of self the Confessional poets illuminated with liberating candor is no longer a frontier at all in a culture that since then has come to embrace psychotherapy, recovery groups, talk shows and, in its literature, the memoir as a literary genre....

To anyone with a taste for the “personal” in poems, it seems more important than ever to seek models in writers who offer, along with glimpses into their lives and inner landscapes, provocative restraint and selectivity in

their handling of detail and also a less definable quality, insight distilled anew in poem after poem. For me, the personal poetry of Linda Pastan, Jack Gilbert, Jane Kenyon, and William Stafford has these qualities to such a degree that it defies labels and the waxing and waning of controversies. Their poems soar beyond the singular life but remain connected to it, like kites in a good wind. Theirs is the sort of poetry I find myself turning to first thing in the morning, before the day's obligations take the edge off my alertness, so that I might absorb some of the calm and clarity of their inner lives and the resultant sense of entering some--dare I say it?--inviolable personal space along with the speaker. Their poems seem to arise from the self as sanctuary so purely that they replicate the experience of *being* in sanctuary; in this respect their poems bind poet, poem and reader in a moment as intimate and transcendent as the act of prayer.