The Lyric Self: Artifice and Authenticity in Recent American Poetry

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The late 1950s is arguably one of the great watershed periods in American poetry. The publication of Allen Ginsberg's Howl & Other Poems (1956), Theodore Roethke's Words for the Wind (1958), W.D. Snodgrass's Heart's Needle (1959), Robert Lowell's Life Studies (1959), and Anne Sexton's To Bedlam and Part Way Back (1960) dislodged the dominance of mid-century formalism. Besides the loosening of form, what became central to a poet's reputation at the brink of the 1960s was the author's candor in recounting his or her most private experience and emotions within the poem. By the mid-1960s, a new generation of poets had succeeded in throwing off the academic restraint post-war American poetry that had been dominated by the influence of Auden and the New Critics. Not only had these younger poets broken through the barriers of form, often writing without the net of regular rhyme and meter, they had also broken other taboos by confessing in their poems the most personal or salacious episodes from their private lives— their breakdowns, affairs, alcoholism, and other sordid stuff.

Lowell's Life Studies—arguably the most influential collection of its time—as well as the work of so-called "post-confessional" poets of the 1980s and '90s, depends upon poetic conventions that date back to the English Romantics, especially Coleridge and Wordsworth. In Life Studies, Lowell premiered a freer, more colloquial, Williamsque line, permitting only a residual presence of the meter and rhyme for which he had been justly acclaimed. But Lowell's breakthrough work in Life Studies owes a debt as much to the English Romantics as it does to W.C. Williams or the Beats.

By the late 1970s and early 1980s, the mode of writing introduced by Coleridgean poetry had become so dominant within the poetic mainstream that its rhetorical strategies became almost paradigmatic. Critics began to employ terms such as "sincerity" and "artifice" to describe the contrasting personal and impersonal modes for writing poems: the former underwriting the "naturalness" of voice and the casual reportage of private personal experience; the latter underscoring the prominence or vividness of craft, including traditional elements of prosody, in the poem. In 1980, poet/critic Jonathan Holden described contemporary poets favoring "naturalness" of voice over "craft," writing that the principle problem had become "how much consciousness artificiality a poem should display." Holden argued that: "More personal a poem is—the more a poem purports to be about the self of the author—the more the question of how sincere the poem sounds will be a factor in our judgment of it. And the greater the requirement for sincerity, the more questionable will be the role of craft." Of course, as the '80s dawned, despite the emergence of Language Poetry and also the rise of New Formalism, the autobiographical lyric that combined emotionally charged imagery and plain-style personal statement had become de rigueur in mainstream American poetry—and came to represent for dissenting poet/critics like Charles Bernstein a hegemonic "official verse culture." Since the 1990s, autobiographical personal poetry, as the dominant mode of the poetic mainstream, has become a much-contested site. The mainstream, as I refer to it, has been represented since the late '70s largely by free-verse poets, mostly associated with MFA programs—as opposed to poets associated with Language writing or other "experimentalist" schools in the postmodern avant-garde.

The major poems by a significant number of these poets often offer the reader a dramatically enhanced version of the author's private experience, usually in the form of a dominant lyric or lyrical narrative, and find closure with a psychological epiphany. The speaker in these poems is a figure I call the lyric self, a voice positioned to speak as the poet—an authorial speaker. The lyric self may not be identical to the author's actual self in real life, but it is a facade, altered to some degree by the imaginative necessities of the poem. It is my contention that the lyric self's emergence pre-dates Lowell and his confessional heirs, making its earliest and most influential appearance in English-language poetry in the Conversation Poems of Samuel Taylor Coleridge written at the end of the 18th century.

The lyric self is in fact a Romantic construction whose viability depends upon conventions that encourage the reader's belief in the poem as a representation of the author's authentic lived experience or emotion outside the poem. Such conventions require that the reader trust, even insist upon, the poet's description of the author's personality or temperament in the world outside the poem. The critic Jed Rasula in The American Poetry Wax Museum citing John Koethe, argues that this sort of writing encourages a "poetics of the 'individual voice,'" valuing authority and fidelity to the poet's origins in prepoetic experience or emotion. Thus, it makes perfect sense for Jonathan Holden to argue that the greater the poem's requirement for sincerity, the greater the need that the poem's craft be invisible. Despite its purported fidelity to authentic experience, the poem nonetheless remains a literary artifact—a text—and as such can at best only be a simulacrum, the measure of whose authenticity or authority must be determined by the reader. Stephen Dunn claims that: "Sincerity is something other than what one 'honestly' asserts, and it is arrived at with the help of a mask." Dunn further claims that for its sincerity to be convincing, a poem relies upon the successful deployment of artifice which the poet, like a successful con artist, uses to convince the reader. Dunn writes: "I want to feel a deep sincerity of purpose, the artifice almost invisible." It is my purpose in these pages to make the artifice visible, to examine rhetorical strategies that poems in the autobiographic mode frequently utilize to persuade readers of their authenticity. A number of such poems, which I call the modern Conversation poem, depend upon the same rhetorical strategy Coleridge devised for his discursive, blank-verse Conversation poems written between 1794 and 1798.

THE CONVERSATION POEM

Critics apply the term "Conversation poem" to nine of Coleridge's poems, seven of which he grouped together under the heading "Meditative Poems in Blank Verse" in his 1817 collection Sibyline Leaves. The three examples best known by modern readers are "The Estian Harp," "This Little-Tree Bower My Prison," and ...
The poem's rhetoric is precisely constructed so as to take the reader into the role of the speaker's friend to whom the poem is addressed. The reader is positioned in the role of the poet's interlocutor, sitting alongside the poet's friend Charles Lamb, with whom the poet/speaker communes about an object of love for their sister—Lamb's sister is invalid. Coleridge, as the speaker, imagines his friend's suffering over the invalid sister he has been nursing. Such imaginings lead the speaker to recall his own affection for his dead sister. Through linking the speaker and interlocutor's feelings for their sisters, the poem establishes its rhetoric of empathy, implicating the reader as a participant in the construction of the poem's emotions. As the silent interlocutor, the reader's understanding is also implicit in the poem. The title itself, "To a Friend," as well as the poem's familiar forms of address turn the reader into the speaker's familiar, intimate to whom the speaker can confide: "Thus far to my ailing brain hath built the rhyme! Elaborate and swelling: yet the heart! Not owns it.

It is difficult without resorting to the antiseptic language of linguistics to describe how this positioning of the listener actually works. Linguists have noted that conversation is a cooperative form of discourse. According to Paul Werth: "Conversations occur in social situations, between participants bearing social relationships with each other, and having certain conversational goals, which can be viewed in terms of social functions." Also that "Conversational goals may also be viewed in terms of intended meaning; A Conversational contribution... is from this viewpoint a message having a cooperative function, i.e., it is an integral part of a jointly-entered contract to make sense." Coleridge derived his Conversational poem form by modifying personal letters that he wrote to friends, sometimes incorporating verse. The relationship between poet and reader in such circumstances would operate much like that between letter writer and addressee. As in conversation, the writer of a personal letter and its recipient share a...
common body of personal knowledge and concerns—a common ground not widely available to others. A poem in the Conversational mode must make a similar claim to a common ground between poet/speaker and the intended reader in which other readers can cooperate in the production of meaning.

Typically, a narrative lyric in the Conversational mode would begin in a locale or circumstance familiar to both speaker and reader. As Steven Cramer writes in The Atlantic Online:

"...a conversation poem typically begins in a precisely visualized, usually domestic location—the fire-lit nursery in 'Frost at Midnight,' where Coleridge watches over Harriet as she sleeps; or just outside the "pretty cot" in 'The Eldian Harp,' where the Coleridges spent the first idyllic weeks of their ultimately dreadful marriage.

Fortified by the sense impressions of its locale, the conversation poem sets off on a journey—into memory, introspection, metaphysical projection, and finally toward a vision of divinity—before circling back, the poet profoundly changed by that epiphany, to the spot from which it erupted."

But this venturing out-epiphany-homecoming structure of the Conversation poem is not the only essential characteristic that distinguishes the present-day Conversational mode. There are indeed a host of modern examples from poets as diverse as Robert Frost, Robert Lowell, Elizabeth Bishop, Richard Wilbur, and Gerald Stern who have produced poems which intentionally or not revisit the Coleridgean structure. What distinguishes the Conversational mode is not simply the way the poem thematizes its own narrative structure, but the manner in which the voice of the speaker is used to take the reader into the speaker's confidence. Taking a listener into one's confidence is what happens in conversation between friends. When the poem's speaker follows what linguists refer to as "the Conversational maxims," the reader, recognizing the pragmatic cues, will cooperate in co-producing the utterance's most apparent meaning. If what a speaker says in a poem diverges from the Conversational maxim that what is being said is what the speaker believes to be true, and the statement is presented with accompanying evidence, then the reader/listener will accept the statement as being sincere. The production of sincerity has become central to poems written in the "Post-Confessional" mode.

And the production of sincerity is integral to the construction of the lyric self. It is the Romantic invention of the lyric self that the impersonal prescriptions of an anti-Romantic Modernism—formulated by Yeats, Eliot, Pound, and Stevens—were designed to resist. And it is in reaction against the chilly impersonality of later formalist Modernism that Confessional poetry sprung, under the sway of the Freudian and Jungian psychology prevailing at mid-century. Such a change in poetic decorum ushered in a resurgence of the lyric self in all its theatricality, providing the grounds for the present-day post-Confessional era. "Poetic decorum," writes Billy Collins in his essay "My Grandfather's Tackle Box: The Limits of Memory-Driven Poetry" is "that cultural force which sets forth for any given age certain guidelines governing acceptable artistic expression."

He argues that poetic decorum would not have allowed for poets to make autobiographical material central to their poetry before the 1798 publication of Lyrical Ballads by Wordsworth and Coleridge. "Up until the end of the eighteenth century, poetic decorum would remind an author that he must keep himself subordinate to his subject matter... For a poet to write of his own life... would have been not only self-indulgent but of no value to an audience interested in its own edification, not the secrets of the poet's past." However, writes Collins, despite our postmodern concessions to the unreliability of text and narrator, "readers of contemporary poetry still make deep emotional investments in the poems (not the 'speakers') whom they love to read... We retain a felt, post-romantic attachment to the author as a reliable self-expressive source—an equivalent to..."
the human voice we hear arising from print."\(^{56}\)

Collins also questions whether "aesthetic distance" is still privileged. He writes: "What we really cherish is its opposite—what William Matthews has called aesthetic intimacy."\(^{57}\) What brings readers to value such intimacy is the reader's participation in whatever I have previously called the rhetoric of empathy. The reader becomes invested in the speaker as a psychologically transparent and invisible presence, a presence that for the reader represents a virtual self behind the text with whom he or she can imagine having a rapport. Modern readers have responded to the all-too-human claims of such textually constituted selves since the generation of Lowell. It seems that a Post-Confessional poetic decorum has arisen which legitimizes poems as autobiographic texts much more readily than as texts constructed as fictions.

Collins adds that such an autobiographical reading seems more inevitable once we become familiar with a larger body of work by poets "with whom we have formed long-standing alliances. The more we read of any one poet, the more clearly a human shape begins to emerge which we come to recognize as the human Berryman, the human Bishop. Eventually, we develop—sometimes against our wishes—a kind of interior soap opera, or call it a wax museum of poets—figural images we can visit and even commune with.\(^{58}\)

**A CONFIDENCE GAME**

Jon Anderson's poem, "In Autumn," originally published in 1974, follows the storyline of a Coleridgean narrative—the journeying out, epiphany-finding, circling back scenario described by Cramer. Anderson's poem begins with the poet/speaker going on to his house and the river valley below:

"...The river 
Below was a dark, dark line. 
My house was quaint 
I sat, not thoughtful, 
Lost in the body awhile."

He then returns home, taking the "back way, winding / through sounds of cedar and pine."\(^{59}\) On this winding journey home, the poet/speaker may be seen as entering Dante's woods—the sela oscura—and having entered becoming reflective.

I can tell you where I live; 
My grief is that I bear no grief & so I bear myself; I know I live apart. 
But have had long evenings of conversation. 
The faces of which betrayed 
No separation from a place or time. Now, 
In the middle of my life, 
A woman of delicate bearing gives me 
Her hand, & friends 
Are so enclosed within my reasoning 
I am occasionally them.\(^{60}\)

When poet/speaker says his grief is that he bears no grief "& so I bear myself," the implicit question is bear (bare) himself to whom? The answer would seem to implicate the reader, the confidant who presence is constellated by the poem's empathic rhetoric. Would it not be the reader-as-confidant with whom the speaker has "long evenings of conversation?" In that context, "I know I live apart" can be read as either that the speaker lives at a remove from others in a solitude that encourages the expression of his inwardness. Or that he lives (al)one—plays a role, creates a lyric self within the text that fulfills the transaction with the reader required to produce the poem's meaning.

The second reading would seem to be reinforced by the lines, "& friends/ Are so enclosed within my reasoning/ I am occasionally them." By locating friends as "enclosed within my reasoning," the poet/speaker suggests that such friends remain an intimate presence, absent or not. Indeed, would not the friends enclosed within the speaker's reasoning also imply the presence of the reader, who like those absent friends has been taken into the speaker's confidence? By locating the reader as both interlocutor and friend, the poem generates its rhetoric of empathy. However, in actuality the poet/speaker is unlikely to be a friend, or even an acquaintance (unless the reader knows the actual Jon Anderson). Or perhaps is not an actual person at all, but a fictional figure. Thus, the poem could be said to construct a confidence game, a fiction in which the speaker is positioned rhetorically to promote the reader's investment in an actual person, the poet behind the poem, who the reader constructs, based upon whom the speaker to be.

"I WOULD LIKE TO MAKE YOU BELIEVE IN ME"

That the speaker in a Conversation poem is taken to be autobiographic is determined in large part by the reader's perception of the speaker's reliability, by the degree of aesthetic intimacy the speaker allows, and how closely the speaker's discourse conforms to the Conversational maxims. Given our habit of reading the "I" in a conversational lyric as an "authentic" autobiographical speaker, the Conversational conventions themselves have become ripe to be thematized and subverted. In Stephen Dunn's "Biography in the First Person," the poet-Conversational decorum is used against itself. The poem begins:

This is not the way I am. 
Really, I am much taller in person, 
the haintle concealed reaches back 
my old paper before my grandfather, and the shyness my wife 
will not believe in has always been 
I was bold on first dates.

By raising an expectation, as the title does, that the "I" represents an authentic person—an autobiographic speaker—the Post-Confessional habits of reading are usually reinforced. But habits of reading can be disrupted if Conversational maxims are knowingly violated. Dunn's poem appears to deliberately violate the maxim of not speaking what is known to be false.

Yet, for the poem to achieve its ironic effect, the reader must detect, from the very opening lines, that the speaker is not telling the truth. As the ironies multiply, the speaker's veracity is increasingly undermined. Because of the speaker's predictability, the reader cannot determine the transparency of the speaker's...
Stephen Dunn in his essay "the poet as fictionist," argues that, "we need to enlarge our sense of what can constitute the personal so that it includes the kindred and alien experiences of our fellow humans." And that "Poet-fictionists know that their true love is the poem—that experience made of words—not the experience behind it...This may mean that...we're primarily interested in phrasing and pacing not to mention the exploration of the inherent larger subject...which we must remember is not peculiar to ourselves." To produce such poems, Dunn recommends poets "should feel free to employ whatever we need in order to approximate our sense of the real, which [Marianne] Moore would call 'the genuine.'" Yet Dunn's position appears to be consistent with the Post-Confessional poetic decorum, that even if the poem does not contain an exact replica of experience, it should contain a close "approximation." Despite Dunn's desire for poetry not to be determined by what is autobiographically authentic, his argument still privileges the discourse of sincerity. His "fictionist's credo" echoes Goethe's Conversational Maxims.

Yet, by suggesting that a poem's subject encompasses what is outside the poet's actual experience, Dunn argues for stretching the limits of the Post-Confessional poetic decorum—whose conventions are showing signs of exhaustion. Indeed, autobiographic poetry recovery has become less dominant within the poetic mainstream, having been the subject of nearly three decades of almost continuous critique from both the postmodernist avant-garde and the neo-formalists for producing a poetry that has become increasingly derivative and banal.

In a manner have some poems in the Conversational mode attempted to interrogate the discourse of sincerity, to disentangle the lyric self from the actuality of prior experience and thus explore the inherent larger subject, to use Dunn's phrase, "not peculiar to ourselves?" Linda Gregg's "Asking for Directions" suggests the larger subject in its deployment of declarative language in an effort to objectify lyric subjectivity, but only partially succeeds in doing so. Jorie Graham's "Region of Unlikeliness" moves further in the direction of the larger subject, utilizing a more radical strategy of narrative disruption to expose the lyric self as a rhetorical construct, and suggesting that language can be generative of our sense of the real.

Gregg's poem presents the testimony of an authorial female speaker addressing a "you," her presumably married lover whom she is accompanying to Chicago from Manhattan by train as she returns home to her family. The poem documents the last hours the lovers spend together, apparently having agreed to end their affair prior to the start of the poem. The "you" is situated as a silent interlocutor to whom the speaker recounts events in which he is both a participant and in the recounting a spectator—a position shared by the reader. As is characteristic of poems in the Conversational mode, the "I" and "you" possess a common body of personal knowledge and concerns, a common ground not widely available to others, yet to which the reader is privy. Although theatrically dramatized, the "I" is in the end of the affair in a narrative seemingly unenhanced by rhetoric or figurative ornament.

The poem opens in the conditional tense: "We could have been mistaken for a married couple / riding the train from Manhattan to Chicago / the last time we were together." The use of the conditional positions the reader as a spectator who might casually assume, observing the couple, that they were married. The couple is represented behaving in a manner that signifies intimacy, "I slept across your / chest and stomach without asking permission." However, the conditional also generates the line's verbal irony—the couple's marital status is deliberately misidentified. The mistreading of the couple as married is in fact the product of the speaker's subjectivity, not the spectator's gaze. The reader is quickly led to understand the couple's relationship is adulterous by the poem's deployment of Conversational conventions that take the reader/spectator into the speaker's confidence. If the reader presumes the speaker's language to be transparent, according to the Conversational Maxims, the speaker's utterance will be judged to be true. The reader's Post-Confessional habits of reading also reinforce the belief that the speaker's narrative is genuine, objectifying the retelling of her difficult personal situation.

But the conditional tense also compels the reader to grapple with the language, particularly the degree to which an utterance such as "We could have been mistaken for..." can be read as knowingly being true or false. On what grounds can the reader determine the speaker's reliability? As readers we do not actually know the speaker. Nor are we situated as firsthand witnesses to the events the poem dramatizes, only to the speaker's re-telling of them. As readers we find...
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ourselves in "the in-between places, the world / with its back turned to us," reliant upon the language through which the speaker narrates the scenes of the lovers parting. The speaker's self-consciousness, which the Conversational mode foregrounds, emphasizes that in addition to the lovers' drama what is also being staged by the poem is the speaker's subjectivity—the speaker's desire to possess her beloved, to not let him go. So is the speaker's claim plausible that she and her lover could have been mistaken for a married couple? What distinguishes a married couple from any other? The speaker's purpose would seem less a matter of representing a demonstrable truth than the speaker's quixotic version of it. The speaker's reliability, therefore, is contingent upon the reader recognizing the speaker's desire as implicit within the poem, which also exposes the poem's reliance on Conversational conventions—its playing the confidence game.

By reading the narrative evidence as reliable, the reader determines the speaker's utterance, although saturated by her subjectivity, her desire, is genuine:

"There was a smell to the sheepskin lining of your new Chinese vest that I didn't recognize. I felt it deliberate..."...

...In the station you took your things and handed me the vest, then left as if planned. So you would have ten minutes to meet your family and leave. I stood by the seat dazed by exhaustion and the absoluteness of the end, so still I was aware of myself breathing, I put on the vest and my coat, got my bag and, turning, saw you through the dirty window standing outside looking up at me."

Nonetheless, the line "I felt it deliberately," which the speaker interjects after smelling the lining of either a sigh or the vest her lover handed her, enclosing herself within an aesthetic and emotional clarity, his obligations and hauntingly urgent interrogations reinvent time, perception, and story and cast us into duels of logic with brilliant illumination."—Bruce Bradley

THE DREAM OF AUTHENTICITY

Jorie Graham's "Region of Unlikeliness" begins in the second person, a "you" read as the mirrored "I" of the authorial speaker—a common practice within the post-Confessional poetic parlor. The poem's narrative, however, self-consciously foregrounds its own conventions, interrogating the subjectivity that the deployment of the second person speaker exposes:

You wake up and you don't know who is there breathing beside you (the world is a different place from what it seems) and then you do. The window is open, it is raining, then it has just ceased. What is the use of poetry, friend? And you, are you one of those girls?"9

The poem describes an incident the authorial "you" is remembering when as a thirteen-year-old girl she woke up in a man's room in Rome unsure of where she stood by the seat dared by exhaustion she was and who she was with. The incident is staged and the absoluteness of the end, so still had planned. So you would have...

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What Graham’s speaker grapples with is that memory, because it is a product of language, is inseparable from the process of the poem’s composition, which in fact determines it. Because the speaker confesses to us as reader her struggle with these difficult issues, we read such lines as belonging to the discourse of sincerity.

Graham further theatricalizes the writing process, switching the narrative frame to “Twenty years later” and near Tie Siding, Wyoming, where the speaker watches butterflies fluttering. This second narrative serves not only as the poem’s lyric epiphany but also as a trope for the meta-narrative of composing in language: “... the new hatchings // everywhere—they’re drying in the grasses // they lift their wings up // into the groundwind //—so many—I kick them gently to make room—clusters lift with each step.” Here the poem provides the one detail that can most readily be read autobiographically as peculiar to the poet: the fact that Graham lived in Tie Siding. The Conversational conventions allow us to seize that detail, using it to read the fluttering butterflies as a self-reflexive trope. The butterflies are becoming visible everywhere just as the language does within the poem, which the poet understands she must take responsibility for in the process of writing the narrative that is pulling her memory back to Rome. At the end of the poem when the earlier memory reasserts itself what also becomes visible—visible even by means of the line breaks which call attention to the materiality of the language—is the allegoration of the narrative: “and below the women learning calling the price out bundling / each fruit, shade and shadow off it.”

**Disrupting Sincerity**

Billy Collins is another poet who, often working within the Conversational mode, finds ways to make the reader conscious of the artifice behind the construction of lyric self. His nuanced critique of what he calls “memory-driven poetry” is one of the pleasures from that for a careful reader lies beneath the comic wit and the deceptive, seemingly artless surface of a number of Collins’s poems. In “Osso Bucó,” Collins constructs a speaker who takes pleasure in his gluttony. Collins’s poem begins at the speaker’s dinner table, goes on an inward journey as the speaker imagines places of deprivation and hunger, and then returns to the speaker’s bedroom at the end of the night, where falling asleep beside his companionable wife the speaker has the poem’s obligatory epiphany. “Osso Bucó” not only recapitulates the structure of the Conversation poem but also questions the conventions of the Conversational mode. The speaker tells us:

I am away now in the hour after dinner, a citizen tilted back on his chair, a creature with full stomach—something you don’t hear much about in poetry, that sanctity of hunger and deprivation. You know, the driving rain, the boots by the door, small birds searching for berries in winter.

But tonight, the Lion of contentment has placed a warm, heavy paw on my chest, and I can only close my eyes and listen to the drums of wool thudding in the distance.  

The speaker’s hyperbolic description of contentment alerts the reader that the speaker’s language is potentially untrue. The description of poetry, implicating the reader/interlocutor with the all encompassing “you know,” similarly underscores the language’s ironic hyperbole: “the driving rain, the boots by the door, small birds searching for berries in winter.” The irony is what drains away authority from the poem’s representation of the genuine. Where is the genuine to be found amid this language mortified with metaphor? Is it the poem’s playful invention, rather than its fidelity to the genuine, that is privileged.

I love the sound of the bone against the plate and the fortress-like look of it lying before me in the meat of risotto, the meat soft as the leg of an angel who has lived a purely airborne existence. And best of all, the secret moment, the invaded privacy of the animal prized out with a knife and swallowed down with cold, exhilarating wine.

I would also assert that the poem’s figure in this first stanza, the act of eating Osso Bucó, thematizes the conventions of the Conversational mode; the object of the reader’s craving being the speaker’s “invaded privacy,” the “secret moment” which is “prized out” with the knife of the poem. Permission to invade the speaker’s privacy is a condition of the discourse of sincerity. Therein lies the reader’s investment in the speaker’s actuality as the poet’s human presence.

Collins’s poem deliberately disrupts the reader’s investment in the actuality of the speaker by violating the Conversational maxim that one should not

Collins's authentic lived-experience at the dinner table is of little consequence. Yet the reader remains positioned within the structure of the poem's narrative to posit the speaker as being a representation of the poet who has taken us into his confidence. The poem does not resolve the matter of the speaker's authenticity with its ending epiphany:

In a while, one of us will go up to bed and the other one will follow. Then we will slip below the surface of the night into a river of water, drifting down and down to the dark, soundless bottom until the weight of dreams pull us lower still, below the shale and layered rock, below the earth itself, into the marrow of the only place we know.

In the narrative, the "us" is presented as the speaker and his wife. However, read according to the conventions of the Conversational mode, the "us" can represent the speaker and reader/internlocutor, who have embarked on a journey together through the uncertainties of the poem's discourse, and who have been absorbed into the indeterminacy that lies inside the production of meaning. The marrow of the only place we know.

Such a reading best accounts for the poem's tone of relaxed yet uneasy chumminess, the reader left unsure whether the proverbial rug has or has not been pulled out from under us.

Clearly, conventions of the Conversational mode inherited from Coleridge suit very well the Post-Confessional poetic decorum of our era. One of those purposes, borrowed from the earlier flowering of letter writing in the 18th century, is to engender the reader's broad admiration for the letter's author. Though the identity of Billy Collins's speaker may be less autobiographically determined than the speaker in Jon Anderson's, Linda Gregg's, or Jorie Graham's poems, the promotion of the reader's admiration for an authorial agent who can use language to produce such gluttonous pleasures remains central to Collins's poetic strategy. In considering such recent examples of poems in the Conversational mode, it should be useful to remember Stephen Dunn's cautionary lines: "Be careful! I would like to make you believe in me." Such a disclaimer could be applied to any poem whose author invites aesthetic intimacy, and which seeks to take the reader into its confidence.

Notes
2. Ibid.
6. Ibid., 110.
8. Ibid., 35.
9. Ibid.
11. Ibid., 10.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid., 89.
17. Ibid., 90.
18. Ibid., 91.
20. Ibid.
21. Ibid.
22. Ibid.
24. Ibid.
25. Ibid.
26. Ibid.
27. Dunn, Walking Light, 185.
28. Ibid., 189-90.
29. Ibid., 191.
30. Ibid., 189-90.
33. Graham, 16.
34. Ibid.
35. Ibid.
36. Ibid.
37. Ibid., 17.
38. Ibid., 16-17.
40. Ibid.
41. Ibid.
42. Ibid., 116.
43. Ibid., 117.
44. Ibid.
45. Ibid.
46. Ibid.
47. Ibid., 117-118.
48. Ibid., 118.
50. Ibid.
51. Ibid., 50.