

PREFACE

When I first envisioned this book I hoped to learn what American poets had to say about the mysterious processes of influence and mastery. Here's a paragraph from the letter I sent to prospective contributors:

The idea is that each contemporary American poet chooses 3–5 poems that have influenced his or her poetry, as well as a poem of his or her own. You would then write a short *essay* discussing the nature of the influence the poems have had on your work, and talk about the idea of mastery, what it is, and how you wrote your poem, what problems you faced—what the process was. I'm leaving the content of the essay as open as possible at this point. Please feel free to make any connections you like under the general categories of influence and mastery.

I am happy to say that twenty-eight of the finest contemporary poets in America accepted my proposal, and as you read *My Business is Circumference* you will see how each poet interpreted the invitation to muse on influence and mastery. In choosing the poems that have influenced them, in selecting their own poems, and in writing about influence and mastery, the contributors have created an intimate and helpful work. Poem by poem, essay by essay, the poets show the reader their distinctive involvement with writing and reading and how those nearly twin activities feed into one another.

This is a book for people who go to poetry because they believe it is a serious, almost miraculous activity, and who want to get as close as possible to the actual struggle of creating poetry, who want to know about a poet's relationship to language and experience. Many styles, many approaches to the craft of writing appear here. I hope that readers will feel as enriched as I do to be so happily contained by this eloquent circle of voices.

Scores of people have devoted a great deal of time and resources to bring this project to fruition. I want to thank each of the contributors, whose work and generosity have made the book all I had originally hoped it would be—and more. In addition to the contributors, several others worked hard to see the book to publication. Thanks go to Sarah Dry, Ilana Stanger, Martha K. Davis, and Elizabeth Scanlon for their involvement, and I am especially grateful to Rayna Kalas and William Schofield who oversaw the major job of editing and proofreading the selections.

Stephen Berg
Philadelphia 2001