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Poetic Politics in the Confessional Poetry of Lowell and Plath

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Abstract

This paper critically examines the cultural shifts the confessional poets mainly Robert Lowell and Sylvia Plath brought in postwar American poetry. Under the rubric of postwar isolation ongoing developmental practices induced by Fordist culture whatever psychic disturbances the contemporary generations encountered, are reflected in Lowell and Plath's poetry. Unlike St. Augustine's sacramental confession, confessional poetry primarily aims at autobiographical self-exploration in essence. Yet, the confessional poetry departs from the life writing with its sharp delving into the poet's life. The kernel point of this paper is to discuss the way the poets debunk the boundary between private and public domain and the way they prefer to write on socially stigmatized issues like alcoholism, mental illness, adultery, suicidal thought, and depression. By exploring these issues, I argue that confessional poetry penetrates into the poetics of politics under postmodernism which blurs the border line of raw and cooked, decent and profane matters. While examining the selected poems of Lowell and Plath, the cathartic motto of the poets has been highly focused when they express their troubled experiences which were indecent in the past.

Keywords: Confessional poetry, cathartic expiation, troubled mind, impersonality, politics, and autobiographical lyric

Introduction

Confessional poetry emerged in America in the 1950s and early 1960s as a counter culture, in dissonance with T. S. Eliot's theory of impersonality: "Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality" (qtd. in Hoffman 698). Eliot does not adhere to poets' subjective expression in poetic creation. He argues that there must be

dissociation of personal feeling with poetry. Unlike Eliot's disapproval on personal emotive expression in poetic creation, confessional poetry primarily relies on expressing intimate feeling and experience. It is a lyrical narrative which deals with intimate experiences of poets' life. It reveals the self of the narrator that intermingles with the poet. In addition, there is the fusion of poetic excellence with tormenting turmoil of the poet. In other words, it is autobiographical in essence because confessional poetry being a practice, not just the subject of individual poems, we ought to turn now to a body of work, and the choice of poet almost makes itself (Lerner 52). Lerner's concern is to deal confessional poetry as a genre. The 1950s and 60s on prima facie stood as the age of identity markers by debunking the grand narrative and social mores.

This paper zeroes in on exploring the ensuing queries: how does confessional poetry help the narrator for the cathartic expiation of personal matters, why do the poets put their private sphere on display, and how does confessional poetry contain tumultuous state of America and poets' mind or is there any poetic politics in putting personal traumatic matters on public display? While addressing these problems the paper contends that confessional poetry purposefully ruptures the boundary of private and public sphere because it is a postmodernist politics of celebrating even the personal trauma, sexual abuses, adultery, mental illness and death wish. It can admittedly claim that the rupture of social taboos is the politics of the poets related with this genre. Equally important postulation of aforementioned stand is that confessional poetry is the emotional therapy of the poets' troubled mind during Fordist culture. It is, as well, a journey towards self-discovery that has cathartic effect while purposefully putting the individual privacy on display. In effect, the public display of traumatic experiences regarding the culturally stigmatized issues, viz. drug use, alcoholism, sexuality, and mental illness refer the poetic politics to replicate the ongoing social rupture of the time.

Chiefly, this paper hypothesizes that generally confessional poetry unbuttons the unspoken or hidden personal experience which destabilizes the borderline between socially acceptable and unacceptable or private and public issues. In so doing, it explores marital discord, infidelity, mental illness, alcoholism, drug abuse, suicidal thoughts, sexual perversion, depression, and fear of failure as the subject matters to challenge and set a new cultural paradigm. It also lets the readers scrutinize the poets' psyche. Unquestionably these stuffs were taboos in Victorian time.

Largely, this paper while analyzing confessional poetry does not aim to repudiate over suffering, but rather it pays attention on the politics of such articulations composed within a specific set of cultural circumstances, in question. Finally, this paper departs from the poet's biographical approach to dig out confession not as the pastoral atonement but as a new poetic genre. Indeed, it has no interface with the pastoral discursive technique to exploit aforementioned contents as methods to explicate in Robert Lowell's "Water," "For the Union Dead," "Skunk Hour," and "To Speak of Woe that is in Marriage," and Sylvia Plath's "Colossus" and "Daddy." These poems mirror the unjust social taboos which is also the technique of the poets to mark their protest by displaying the wish of new generations who breaks the social order.

While dealing with confessional poetry, Abrams and Herpham defines it as; "Confessional poetry" designates a type of narrative and lyric verse, given impetus by the

American Robert Lowell's *Life Studies* (1959), which deals with the facts and intimate mental and physical experiences of the poet's own life" (64). They also focus on the personal expression related to the poet's mental and physical reality. They, in addition, explain the nature of confessional poetry as; "Much confessional poetry was written in rebellion against the demand for impersonality by T. S. Eliot and the New Critics. By its secular subject matter, it differs from religious spiritual autobiography in the lineage of Augustine's *Confessions*"(64). By nature, confessional poetry is a protest against objective expression of New Criticism and it, moreover, stands away from religious confession for purging the mind.

Pursuing the same lane of intensely personal expression Murfin and Ray expound confessional poetry as a contemporary poetic mode that discusses poets' private lives including their deepest sorrows and confusions. These type of poets often address the reader directly and go beyond romanticism's emphasis on individual experience in their use of intimate details and psychoanalytic terms to describe even their most painful experience (193). It is apparent that confessional poetry forwards the traumatic experiences which are densely personal.

Likewise, Cuddon also argues that much poetry, especially lyric poetry, is 'confessional' in so far as it is a record of a poet's states of mind and feelings and his vision of life. . . However, some poems are more overtly self-revelatory, more detailed in their analytical exposition of pain, grief, tension and joy (151). His definition digs out the self-revealing nature of confessional poetry that infuses with personal pain and pleasure. Cuddon furthermore categorizes this type of poetry as a very personal and subjective account of experiences, beliefs, feelings, ideas, and states of mind, body and soul (151). In short, confessional poetry is subjective in nature. Similarly, Kennedy and Gioia seek the implied semantic of this poetry. To them:

Confessional poetry renders personal experience as candidly as possible, even sharing confidences that may violate social conventions or propriety. Confessional poet's times shock their readers with admissions of experiences so intimate and painful—adultery, family violence, suicide attempts—that most people would try to suppress them, or at least not proclaim them to the world. (825)

Indeed, confessional poetry as a part of postmodernism delves into the matters like adultery, violence, death wish, infidelity, sex and sexuality which were taboos in the society because unlike modernism postmodernism celebrates such stuffs.

Correspondingly, confessional poetry suggests that it is self-revelation that serves to reveal an author's repressed anguish or deepest emotions through verses about the personal subjects. Although feelings and emotions have long been considered a core thematic element of poetry, the risqué content conveyed in confessional poetry sets it far apart from more traditional genres (Jennifer Brozak, 2019 May 08). Edward Byrne evaluates confessional poetry through its contents; the intimate, sometimes sordid, autobiography of the poet revealed in explicit first-person narration - rather than any novel technical development or formal advancement. To him confessional poets use first-person narrative to "widen the scope of the poem" and as a "tool to increase a reader's emotional identification with the poet. As a matter of fact, this type of poetry invites

readers to live vicariously through the poem.

Endorsing this sacramental power of confession to Michael Foucault also alludes to pastoral power and articulates; “a ritual in which the expression alone, independently of its external consequences, produces intrinsic modifications in the person who articulates it: it exonerates, redeems, and purifies him and promises him salvation”(61-62). For Foucault, discourse of confession by which modern states exercise power depriving an individual from his privacy. Moreover, there is the implied connotation of Judeo-Christian tradition of anticipating the purity of mind and body for salvation. “It is an intimate personal revelation, especially as presented in a sensationalized form in a book, newspaper, or film.” However, marking a departure from religious and legal uses of the term, the term ‘confessional’ is applicable to a range of practices in contemporary western culture that do not necessarily cast the confessing subject in a negative light. (Silver 18). In tune with Silver, Clarke’s focus is on “‘the natural advantages of the confessional’ rather than its ‘supernatural benefits’ notably anticipates the psychoanalytic concept of catharsis” (qtd. in Silver 24). This cathartic effect of confessional poetry sharply deviates from religious purpose.

Undoubtedly, confessional writing is part of a religious tradition that dates back to Augustine and became part of a therapeutic tradition even before the advent of psychotherapy, which certainly shaped and accelerated the outpouring of personal self-revelation in the twentieth century. Moreover, in confessional poetry, both religious belief and Freudian psychotherapy play very important roles because confession relieves the confessor. Confession, with or without the motivation of penance or psychic pain relief, also represents one of the most varied and intense forms of artistic experimentation in the latter half of the twentieth century.

Notably, the intimate, disturbing nature of such material relocates guilt from the confessing individual to the society in which the trauma occurs. From the same fashion, modern subjectivity might be seen in light of this shift from the sinful self to the traumatized self, whereby confession provides a platform for those who have been oppressed, marginalized or maltreated. Arguably, then, the confessional subject has become the victimized subject *par excellence*, with the traumatic subject matter of confession increasingly informing concepts of individual selfhood. (Silver 19). Nelson elaborates this concept further as; “What made confessional poetry confessional, as opposed to just personal or autobiographical, was the nature and context of its revelations. There is, first of all, the urgency and “rawness” of the revelations.

Personal Conversion into Public

It was M. L. Rosenthal who had coined the term ‘confessional Poet’ while conveying his shock over Robert Lowell’s uncovering his intensely personal matters in *Life Studies* (1959). Lowell primarily dealt with the themes of sexual guilt, alcoholism, confinement in a mental hospital, and developed them in the first person in a way that intended, in Rosenthal’s view, to point to the poet himself. Interestingly, he performs one such reduction in a famous 1959 review of *Life Studies*, writing that “Lowell removes the mask. His speaker is unequivocally himself, and it is hard not to think of *Life Studies* as a series of personal confidences, rather shameful, that one is honor-bound not to reveal”

(qtd. in Morris 208). Rosenthal first identified and defined this new confessional mode. Rosenthal's review characterizes confessional poetry as autobiographical, therapeutic ('soul's therapy' and 'self-therapeutic') and utterly truthful, featuring 'uncompromising honesty.'

In "Skunk Hour," Lowell uses the stuffs from his personal life to formulate an image of ruined culture and alienation of modern people. The isolated narrator lost in a ruined landscape describes, "Nautilus Island's hermit/ heiress" (1-2) who undergoes the repercussions and aftermaths of commercial world while living "in her Spartan cottage" (2) which means she is living humble life and is affected by "eyesores" (11) means the hollow neon civilization that lacks human values. Indeed, the narrator laments at the cost of ill time, "the season's ill" (13) that has pervasively affected American life at large. The ongoing social unrest, cold war, curtailed of citizen rights, eroding American economy, and Vietnamese war had devastated the society. To find the solution of all ills, the narrator expects to follow sacramental path, "her son's a bishop" (4). In fact, Lowell had converted into Catholicism in the 1940s.

Above all, the narrator faces a personal deterioration which approaches absolute negation. Apparently his negation is the outcome of social unrest: "I hear / my ill-spirit sob in each blood cell, / as if my hand were at its throat" (32-34). He succeeds in making his private meditation the public matter for self-therapeutic purpose. Precisely, in this poem, there is the collage of personal and cultural anguish through the explicit echoes of Holderlin, Milton and St. John of the Cross to show the ills of the modern commercial world. However, at the very point he takes upon himself the damnation of his world with the Miltonic Lucifer "I myself am hell" (35), an emotional turn upward occurs, and signaled by the admittedly ambiguous skunk. Though completely unreflective and bestial, this creature is indicative of a minimal animal self-assertiveness and commitment to survival; It has the instincts necessary to derive sustenance from the little the world will offer and, moreover, "will not scare" (48). In identifying himself with this lower forms of life, the persona indeed deprives himself of certain aspects of his humanity, but this is an essential first step toward regaining a fuller sense of it.

He finally, mirrors the sexually perverted generation swept by Beat music and Fordism; "My Tudor Ford Climbed the hill's skull/I watched for love- cars... lay together/ A Car radio bleats/ Love o careless Love" (26-32) to show the degeneration of the time. Shocked by this degenerative time, the narrator stays back "back steps" (44) and observes the performance of skunk generation. This is how in "Skunk Hour," Lowell observes the erosion of humans' character, their craze for Fordism and Beat Music. The allusions of Milton and St. John of the Cross have largely focus on discipline to preserve humanity.

Similarly, in "Water" Lowell narrates his honeymoon tour at "Maine lobster town" (1) with his second wife before they had had marital discord. Here he imagines a perfect nuptial life through the imagery of gulls; "We wished our souls/might return like gulls/ to the rock" (29-31). By dramatizing marital breach, he ruptures the boundary between personal and public business. Notably, he puts himself on the stage by telling his marital tale in this poem. His use of imperative tone and use of past tense to decry the marital split which can be due to queer sexual orientation and infidelity that was growing

up in contemporary America. In fact, 'water' connotes purity and indivisible smooth surface that sharply contrasts with the story of family split of the narrator cum poet. The hectic locale of Maine town transforms into the cold marital relationship, "the water was too cold for us" (32), which the narrator narrates through flashback technique. Ostensibly, it is an urge of the narrator for symphonic marital life which he could not sustain.

Lowell further expresses the marital discord in "To speak of woe that is in marriage." The female narrator displays the infidelity of her gigolo husband; "My hopped up husband drops his home disputes, / and hits the streets to cruise for prostitute" (4-5). This indicates the domestic dispute and adultery which has been openly discussed. This one also refers the extramarital affairs that was there in American society. Indeed, this one is the salient trait of confessional art. Here, Lowell, additionally, shows the dishonesty of the husband; "Oh the monotonous meanness of his lust... / It's the injustice... he is so unjust- / Whiskey-blind, swaggering home at five" (7-9). Generally, lust, alcoholism, and indecent manner were taboos for modernist writer but for the postmodernist confessional writers they become the stuffs of discussion. Moreover, the hidden anguish of the narrator against her Don Juan occupies special room for public discussion. The domestic and sexual brutality is reinforced by; "he stalls above me like an elephant" (14) to show the bestial lust of narrator's Casanova man. In a nutshell, this poem displays marital/familial unharmonious relation of the spouses for the soul's therapy as catharsis.

Likewise, Lowell deals with the social problems that has haunted the American society in "For the Union Dead." He chiefly focuses on the three incidents of the history; Colonel Robert Shaw's dedication while commanding the Negro infantry during civil war, a memorial to Shaw's team who died for Union, and a violent resistance to school integration in contemporary America while recalling his childhood memories. Given that the dozer work for parking lot and 'Statehouse' that has displaced "vegetating Kingdom" (10) and the statues of Union Martyrs, ' the narrator feels like "cowed compliant fish" (8) being kept in the aquarium. This is how denizens were domesticated and through this harsh reality he concerns with civic rights affected by material progress.

Not only that the reference of "Hiroshima boiling" with gerund verb hints the ongoing threat of the peril of nuclear war between Russia and America whereas America was facing the racial segregation at school historically documented in *Brown v Board of Education* (1954) case. In stanza 15, the speaker projects "the drained faces of Negro school-children" (60) it could possibly be a reference to the nine students who integrated Arkansas' Little Rock High School in 1957. Or, the black college students in Greensboro, North Carolina, who protested segregated lunch counters by sitting-ins protests. Daniel Morris rights catches the narrator's angst against the ongoing social practices and comments "blameworthy national identity during a period of nuclear pride, militarism, cold war paranoia, and the ongoing restriction of civil rights" (103) on which Lowell feels guilt ridden. His guilt complex further extends in last stanza when he refers the techno-led American Fordist culture; "The Aquarium is gone. Everywhere/ giant finned cars nose forward like fish" (65-66). To sum up, this snapshot replicates the glorious past and inhumane present thereby the narrator feels afflicted.

Plath's poem, "Daddy" contains Plath's personal life, history of holocaust and an outlet of her suppression which had brought trauma in her life. The narrator tells a tale

of victimized female persona who stands for the holocaust Jews. She begins the poem imagining herself as a prisoner living like a foot in the black shoe of her father:

You do not do you do not to
Anymore, Black shoe
In which I have lived like a foot
For thirty years poor and White,
Barely daring to breathe or Achoo. (1-5)

These lines point out her suffocation under terror haunted life for thirty years. Ostensibly, her father was a German immigrant in America who died when she was eight years old. She had had an Electra complex with him while she thought he was equal to God. She tried to emancipate herself from this bond after his death but she failed. Rather she posits herself as a victimized prisoner living like a foot in the black boot of Gestapo after being haunted by his reminiscences. Possibly she could be a captive of the bond, which could be the canopy of patriarchy that she likes to blur to develop her independent self. The narrator's final release from Electra complex is at the cost of her new life's commencement which is independent, and self-reliant. Literally it is away from penis envy. Not only this stamping to release her angst against her daddy figure who stands for patriarchy and Nazi's atrocity, but also she figuratively kills him; "If I've killed one man, I've killed two —" (71) referring the patriarchy and holocaust creator from which she frees herself.

Thus by linking her personal agony with the holocaust tale whereby the oppressor converts into an oppressed man. She gives a huge vent of her suppressed ego by rebuking daddy figure from whom finally she separates from Electra complex; "Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through" (80). After the metaphoric annihilation of daddy figure, she relieves and sets free from father fixation and sets out her new identity. This is how she succeeds in translating her oppressed self into the free 'self.' In a nutshell, she turns out to be an independent lady who debunks and challenges the patriarchal authority. Her poetic skill relies on transforming her personal trauma into the public matter.

From the same plane, Plath's "Colossus" also gives an outlet of her angst against the myth of patriarchy. Indeed, The Colossus at Rhodes, Greece is a statue of Sun God of Greek time that represents male supremacy. According to the myth, it was a gigantic statue before it fell down. Most importantly, this crumbled statue also replicates her deceased father whom the narrator tries to comprehend. Here the female narrator plays a role of a curator who tends it carefully. The poem begins with the incapability of narrator, 'I' to understand her father. She glues her fragmented memories to read him as the curator links several parts of the body; "I shall never get you put together entirely, /pieced, glued and properly jointed" (1-2). These lines indicate the failure of the narrative persona to know her daddy because of crumbled experiences she had had with him. Given to this situation, the memory she had about him is, he was undeniably rude like the beasts because he left her at her early age without imparting any wisdom to her so that she claims; "I am none the wiser" (10) because he died before she could get wisdom from him. This personal grief of losing her father at her early age is so poignant that she still belittles herself and mourns forever. Because of missing him, she develops

Electra complex with him, “A blue sky out of Oresteia/ Arches above us. O father, all by yourself/ you are pithy and historical as the Roman Forum” (16-18). These lines allude the enlightened wisdom of Greco- Roman era and Aeschylus’ Oresteia (Electra and Orestes had destroyed themselves while avenging Agamemnon’s killer) to show the narrator’s father fixation and her missing of his wisdom.

She notably regards her father’s death as the divine blow to ruin her personal life; “It would take more than a lightning-stroke/ to create such a ruin” (22-23). Nevertheless, she stays near to the colossus figure counting the red star (metaphoric use of fertile life and revolution) hoping that she could revive him so that she could get wisdom from him. In his absence she is leading a gloomy life; “My hours are married to shadow” (28). Here the shadow is the metonymic use to indicate her gloomy life and the relic of her dead father. Nonetheless, hopefully she waits for the arrival of her father in a ship like the Greek warrior; “No longer do I listen for the scrape of a keel/ on the blank stone of the landing” (29-30). Hoping for the literal unity between father and daughter as in the case of Electra and Agamemnon, she mourns in a heart-rending way. She dramatizes her grief and loss so poignantly that the readers fail to distinguish if it is Plath’s autobiography or the artifact of the narrator.

Conclusion

Confessional poetry by nature is the expression of personal experiences which gets vented provoking the cathartic repercussions. It is also an errand towards subjective exploration of the poet. Often confessional poets are crazy and preoccupied with socially stigmatized idea that troubles their minds. Being the postmodernist poets, they blur the borderline between private and public subject matters. In so doing, their autobiographical writings dramatize the unacknowledged trends of the age. Both Lowell and Plath struggle with troubled mind and are masters in shaping their personal traumatic experiences into the creative art to replicate the trouble of the age. Precisely, Lowell expresses his mental agony smeared with the tumultuous time whereas Plath’s lyrics goes with gender trouble. Indeed, confessional poetics works as a therapy to the poets and readers. These poems are colored by emotional extremity to ventilate the personal views because in their confessional expressions there is uncompromising honesty and power of sublime angst of the age which is their politics to debunk the social stigma.

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