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The Poetics of the Personal 'I': Confessional Voice in Selected American Modernist Poems

Asst. Lect. Saeff Ali Abbas^(*)

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Introduction:

Confessional poetry is one of the Sapphic tendencies in modernist literature. It manifests the poet's psychological world by uncovering the hidden side of his life. It discloses his secrets and hidden repressed desires through the confessional act. Confessional poetry is the poetry of the personal or "I." This style of writing emerged in the late 1950s and early 1960s and is associated with poets such as Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, and W.D. Snodgrass. Lowell's book Life Studies was a highly personal account of his life and familial ties and had a significant impact on American poetry. Plath and Sexton were both students of Lowell and noted that his work influenced their own writing.

The confessional poetry of the mid-twentieth century dealt with subject matter that previously had not been openly discussed in American poetry. Private experiences with and feelings about death, trauma, depression and relationships were addressed in this type of poetry, often in an autobiographical manner. Sexton, in particular, was interested in the psychological aspect of poetry, having started writing at the suggestion of her therapist.

The confessional poets were not merely recording their emotions on paper; craft and construction were extremely important to their work. While their treatment of the poetic self may have been groundbreaking and shocking to some readers, these poets maintained a high level of craftsmanship through their careful attention to and use of prosody.

Confessional poets tread the thin line between producing free texts that emerge out of their private lives, and the need to maintain a level of secrecy about their being. In fact, the poets' self-exploration trend extends the body and stretches itself across the

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form of the poetry itself, presenting the reader with a starkness which contrasts the clandestine government operations and suppression of artistic freedom characterising the McCarthy era. Confessional poetry necessitates the baring of the poet's self-exploration. Vulnerability, in this instance, is also self-assertion. Robert Phillips asserts that the faith-based poet places very few "barriers between his self and direct expression of that self (*The Confessional Poets* 8). Confessional poetry admits wrongdoing, unconventional, suicidal, sadistic, masochistic, disastrous thoughts, which shock and mutilate our culturally received senses.

Henceforth, the importance of this study lies in its throwing light on the issue of the personal I in the modernist poetry. It discloses the role of the confessional voice in expressing the poet's repressed, and even subverted desires through the poetic language and rhetorical devices.

One of the most well-known poems by a confessional poet is "Daddy" by Sylvia Plath. Being addressed to her father, the poem contains references to the Holocaust but uses a sing-song rhythm that echoes the nursery rhymes of childhood.

Another confessional poet of this generation was John Berryman. His major masterpiece was *The Dream Songs*, 1969 which consists of 385 poems about a character named Henry and his friend Mr Bones. Many of the poems contain elements of Berryman's own life and traumas, such as his father's suicide. The confessional poets of the 1950s and 1960s pioneered a type of writing that forever changed the landscape of American poetry.

Ann Sexton is among the famous feminist poets at confessional poetry. She expressed her suicidal wish in her poetry. She wrote "Silvia's Death" and "Wanting to Die".

William De Witt Snodgrass considered as a confessional poet. David McDuff observes that like other confessional poets, Snodgrass is at pains to reveal the repressed, violent feelings that often lurk beneath the seemingly placid surface of everyday life.

The purpose of the research is highlighting the confessional I in three poet's poetry. Frank O'Hara poetry, Ann Sexton's, and Robert Lowell's, It is confined to their poetry that expresses persona confessional I.

The academic coefficient of America's post-War consumerism could be found in the sudden influx of New Critical and New Formalist aficionados of the nation's universities. These "value-free technicians" of literary production came to represent the commoditization of literature (Boone 67). Scholarly publications and literary work now possessed not integrity but rather became more products that subscribe to market demands. It is this realisation that drove Robert Lowell to move away from his New Critical roots and write more intimate, "raw" poetry.

In a capitalist economy, where the proletariat strives towards social and economic mobility, the working-class is no longer the only subject of oppression. Those who now occupy the space of the downtrodden - such as women, African Americans, queer folk - belong to all classes and are perpetual underdogs as Robert Duncan puts it as follows:

For some, there are only the tribe and its covenant that are good, and all of mankind outside and their ways are evil; for 'many in America today good is progressive, their professional status determines their idea of "man" and to be genuinely respectable their highest concept of a good "person"—all other men are primitive, immature, or uneducated. (*Politics*)

Just as the women's struggle in the political arena varies from that of men, female confessional poetry too has a different purpose. Sandra Gilbert in *My Name is Darkness: The Poetry of Self-Definition* 1972 states that the male confessional poet "writes in the certainty that he is the inheritor of major traditions, the grandson of history" while his female counterpart "writes in the hope of discovering or defining a self (446). While the man may feel liberated in his skin, the women's body bespeaks shame and illusion.

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Being revolutionists of their times, these writers aim to awaken society from the waking stupor that it is in, to recall attention towards heteronormativity, patriarchy, and consumerism, and the language which sustains and allows it; perhaps the writing itself is a process of self-awakening. The present study explores the different ways in which each of these poets uses subversive rhetoric to communicate their private world, as well as their employed methods to navigate the public space of the text.

Foucault, in *"The Will to Knowledge"*, dates the modern-day idea of honest confession (or confessing to arrive at the truth) to the Christian confessional which, he states, was the examination chamber of "sinful" sexual desires. This indicates very early evidence of discussion (albeit closed) on the subject of the confession of repressed desire; without naming it, all the effects and ramifications of these desires are explored within the space of the confession chamber. The limitations placed about such discussions do not negate their existence. These confessions link much of the self to relations through the narration of all thought and feeling as they pertain to the fulfilment of the repressed desire.

O'Hara's Flamboyant Self:

Stephen Fry, in *"A Simple Backwards Man,"* observes that language "is, as Philip Howard points out, the only true democracy, changed by those who use it." The queerness of Frank O'Hara's language and style has been largely ignored by critics; this is due mostly to his characteristic rhetoric of casualness that belies the extent of his oppositional stance. His rhetoric is subtler and imagines a more open world. Helen Vendler, in her critique on O'Hara's poetry, suggests that his opposition to traditional ideas of masculinity as well as a conventional ideology is apparent in his lack of proper syntax; both are viewed as part of the same problem, i.e. a painfully normative, dichotomising society (20). His lack of punctuation manifests this openness in form, pushing against restrictions of thought and bringing forth a multiplicity of meanings.

"Memorial Day 1950," O'Hara's version of Rimbaud's "Les Portes de septins," is written in the modernist fashion, inspired, it

would seem, by the contents of O'Hara's abode. It was, at that point in history, quite unorthodox yet to admire the modernists. The poem acts as a manifesto for O'Hara's style and influences, particularly his influences in art, namely surrealist painting. It is an enumeration of artistic movements and acts as a historical article for art. While doing so, he manages to assimilate into the form of the poem the styles he so admires, coupling Stein's object catalogue with the surrealist inconsideration for unities, in what Perloff calls a "Dada collage". Perloff also addresses this movie-like quality of the poem which reads like a series of cuts and pans. His bright white toilet set is fascinating in the linkage he finds between the urban and the natural within such a private act. More importantly, O'Hara has juxtaposed his private surroundings with the movements that led to the pieces of art that decorate his life and influence his art. His friend, and fellow New York School poet, John Ashbery, recalls: "I too stayed at the Robinsons' and remembered admiring Frank's room for the kind of Spartan chic he always managed to create around him." O'Hara establishes a direct and personal connection between him and the great artistic poets, by listing their works as part of public history as well as his private space, where "a frying pan on the floor, used as an ashtray" and Guernica co-exists (7).

Art transforms one's life by infiltrating one's private space; in O'Hara's case, this environment nourished his "rebellious, creative imagination" (Perloff). His education as a human being has stemmed from these pieces: "naming things is only the intention / to make things."

Being one of his earlier poems, its rebelliousness is coloured by naivety: the idea of art that withstands all odds, and grows and flourishes despite society and discouraging parents. As Lezama says, in the 2000 movie *Before Night Falls*, "People that make art are dangerous to any dictatorship. They create beauty. And beauty is the enemy." In this sense, art is a rebellion because it seems to have no purpose. Each generation of artists is a break away from an "older" one; as O'Hara's poetry progressed, his rebellion grew more covert and could be found only in the permission of his verse.

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The luxury and fullness of O'Hara's expression abandon any attempt at a pursuit of unity; the poem would instead immerse itself in a pool of irony and multiple preferentiality. It focuses more on the process of meaning generation itself, persuading the reader to take a closer look. O'Hara celebrates the existence of beauty in the contrastive personal traits. In the opening lines of his "Song", he investigates the conception of the beautiful and bad he inquires the presence of attractions in what is socially conceived as "sinful" he endeavours to evaluate the reader's conception of the beautiful and the bad.

someone comes along with an evil character
he seems attractive, is he really, yes. Very
he's handsome as his role is bad. Is it. Yes (158)

Here, he questions what makes someone "dirty" or "bad"? Why are some attractions sinful? The line "you don't refuse to breathe do you?" that permeates the poem urges one to take in the "dirt." His surrealist tendencies challenge yet another dichotomy: dream and reality/ imaginative and social existence. The universality of O'Hara's poetry lies in his ability to challenge these binaries and to find beauty in the messy chaos that is the grey area between what is whimsical and what is socially settled or established.

On the other hand, O'Hara explores his selfhood and its construction by the others in "In Memory of My Feelings" It presents the concept of the self, the ability to know one's self and the ability to be known by others. The poem is like a prophecy. Throughout the poem, O'Hara is distanced from the "self" that the others have constructed to represent him, and he equally distances the "self" he has constructed in his poetry, from his actual physical self. It challenges the idea of a coherent, ideal self.

Terence Diggory states that community is viewed as a fusion or communion of individuals into some greater whole and to think community differently requires the death of the Subject, and those who participate in such an alternative community could be said to

be dead in this sense, as long as it constitutes their community (Diggory (2001), 24).

My quietness has a number of naked selves,
 so many pistols I have borrowed to protect
 myself
 from creatures who too readily recognize my
 weapons
 and have murder in their heart!
 though in winter
 they are warm as roses, in the desert
 taste of chilled anisette.
 At times, withdrawn,
 I rise into the cool skies
 and gaze on at the imponderable world with the
 simple identification
 Of my colleagues, the mountains. Manfred
 climbs to my nape,
 speaks, but I do not hear him,
 I'm too blue. (CP, 253)

The first section of the poem sets the scene of the poet resisting the violence of different communities' tendencies to construct the self-according to some predetermined norm. The poet depicts the subverted selves as "naked selves" equipped with pistols, ready to defend themselves against "creatures who too readily have to recognize my weapons / and have murder in their heart" (CP, 253).

The communities as pluralities as well as the poet's reference to murder establish the idea that participating in a community requires the death of one's selfhood or selves. Likewise, poetry as a genre or as a school tends to organize in the same way that community does. The poem, then, is not only concerned about setting up the controversy between the communities and the selves' resistance to the "murderous" desire of the integration in a community, but it is also concerned with the murderous nature of poetry as well.

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Thus, the poem can be recognized as a repressed desire to liberate the self from the chains of the communities. These chains include the social norm, schools of art, artistic tendencies or movements, and any other imposed institution subverting the writer. It is a confession of the demise of selfhood in its undergoing to the integration with the community and indulgence in writing poetry.

Lowell's America:

While writing what would later become *Ariel*, Plath confessed to being greatly influenced by Lowell's poetry, notably this collection: "I've been very excited by what I feel is the breakthrough that came with, say, Robert Lowell's *Life Studies*, this intense breakthrough into solemn, very personal, emotional experience which I feel has been partly taboo. Robert Lowell's poems about his experience in a mental hospital, for example, interested me very much" (Orr 167-168). Lowell's confessions, like O'Hara's, operate within the obscurity that results from close inspection. One finds that the more he discloses, the less he reveals. The ceiling/stripping paradox that characterises his poetry is true of all confessional poetry. Lowell successfully fuses the public and the personal: his life was covered widely in publications of the era, and most details of his own life were readily available to the public.

On October 13, 1943, Robert Traill Spence Lowell IV was sentenced to a year in prison for refusing, as a conscientious objector, to be drafted into the U.S. Army, "Memories of West Street and Lepke" from the mock-academically named *Life Studies*, he publically "confesses" to his dissent. His fusion of the object and the subject places him in tandem with his changing environs. Lowell's object catalogue is informed by a subjective projection, while the epithets he attaches to himself are externally manufactured. As one who names and one who is being named, he is both subject and object. His descriptions are intended to be compared and contrasted. In the end, though, his connections are simply "hanging," "lost." Living in a huge house with extravagant

luxuries, Lowell represents his upper-class Boston Brahmin social circle,

where even the man
 scavengin
 g filth in
 the back
 alley trash
 cans, has
 two
 children, a
 beach
 wagon, a
 helpmate,
 and is a
 "young
 Republica
 n (90)

But alternatively, imprisoned in his "tranquillized" life, he is "manic," rebellious. Here resides the poet who discarded his Mayflower family's tradition, dropped out of Harvard, joined the Catholic Church (only to later leave it), protested the Vietnamese war, and went to Beatnik gatherings. Influenced by Beat poets like Ginsberg, he started writing increasingly "raw," intimate confessional poetry, best collected in *The Life Studies*.

Lowell's poetry (as with all other confessional poetry) does not deal in experience but a memory. Since the remembering self is separate from the experiencing self, memory is coloured by the poet's attitudes as well as his later adventures. In his description of prison life, the details and characterisations of the inmates are caricatures that yet again provided by an external entity, this time the poet. Each prison inmate represents a kind of American-Abramowitz, the hippie; Bioff and Brown of the middle class; Lepke of the mafia power lords and business moguls. His portrayals are influenced by the mainstream narrative and seem to consist of types rather than fully rounded characters. His treatment of the pacifist is of particular interest:

[...] Abramowitz,
a jaundice-yellow ("it's tan")
and fly-weight pacifist,
he wore rope shoes and preferred fallen fruit.
He tried to convert Bioff and Brown,
the Hollywood pimps, to his diet.
Hairy, muscular, suburban,
wearing chocolate double-breasted suits,
they blew their tops and beat him black and blue.
(90)

Abramowitz's struggles against violence do not seem to yield any positive results; in fact, it is answered with violence. Lowell does not seem to have any sympathy (much less empathy) for the fruitarian. He, like all around him, is merely acting out his given identity.

The identities we carry around, imagining ourselves to be their creators, are, in fact, manufactured merely by our surrounding, our economies, and the social circumstances that we are born into. Our ideologies and religious beliefs are nothing but abbreviations in the end - more labels to classify the "us and the "them"; we are caught up and clothed in these roles. In prison, these symbols are thrown into chaos, "like two toys American / flags tied together with a ribbon of Easter palm." But here, too, he does not belong, just as he does not belong on the outside, where he has so obviously become part of the system, a typical member of his class. These socio-economic, psychoanalytical, political and religious labels are provided as a satire against the black-and-white, literal world of the law, in contrast with the blurred identities of lived life. However, American law was no longer colourless. America had long been a country of diversities, where multiple ethnicities coexist. However, as the number of immigrants increases, there seemed to be no decrease in the nation's fear of difference. Underneath the liberal facade is a country of Puritans apprehensive of any change in the social order. In the 1950's, this containment culture was at its height.

Located firmly in the age of its writing, the primary question the poem raises is that of morality. In a corrupt society, money is everything. The czar of "Murder Incorporated" sits at the head of the criminal hierarchy. He is, in his cell, living the life of a true American, being white, Christian, patriotic, and surrounded by consumer comforts. Louis "Lepke" Buchalter may have committed murder, but how is he any different from the American who is fighting in the wars abroad? Ian Hamilton's reports Jim Peck, an antiwar activist, as having said, "Lowell was in a cell next to Lepke, you know, Murder Incorporated, and Lepke says to him: "I'm in for killing. What are you in for?" 'Oh, I'm in for refusing to kill'" (91). Lepke might, in fact, be the poster boy for the American value system; he, too, was merely a foot soldier. The only line that separates the army man and the hitman is bureaucracy. Just as he has been "lobotomized," America is desensitized into leading morally redundant lives. Lowell's bourgeois guilt is a reaction against the nation's lack of uneasiness in the face of pointless wars. brainwashed into believing in "the cause."

It seems to me that their no clearance between the subjective and the objective in Lowell's poetry the poet in my view is constructed on the unification of the antithetical images. It is a pictorial scene of the American social reality in the poet's time which is characterized by contradiction.

Anne Sexton:

Sexton's poems reveal an inherent "obligation to confess" in the hopes that confession would provide Sexton, a connection with her readers. Through a means of confession, Sexton transfers her internal tormented feelings onto her poetry to make sense of her pain. Sexton's poem "Sylvia's Death," written within a week of Plath's actual death by suicide in February 1963, expresses a speaker who privately yearns for suicide. In the poem,

the speaker confronts “Sylvia,” asking,
how did you crawl into,
crawl down alone
into the death, I wanted so badly and for so long,
the death we said we both outgrew (Sexton 16-19).

The poet and “Sylvia”—publically declared they “outgrew” their interest in suicide. Here, however, the speaker appears deeply affected by Sylvia’s death since Sylvia’s actions of crawling into death look inconsistent from what the two poets confessed to one another. The speaker’s tone comes across as envious, as she admits that she too wanted death so badly. The rhetoric of suicide conveyed in this poem allows the speaker to privately convert her own inner suffering in public, with the hopes of purifying herself from private torment. She also aspires to something else: the mutual understanding of death, which she and Sylvia shared.

“Sylvia’s Death” indicates that, by connecting with others who understand and empathize with the experiences of the fictive “I,” Sexton could regained her own “wounded self.” Unfortunately, such positivit feeling was shortly lived: Jeffrey Berman points out that this poem does not "give any reason why suicide should not be resisted" (175). Sexton points out how empathy may help to cure a person’s wounded psyche. In “Sylvia’s Death,” Sexton offers an empathetic “reader response” to Plath’s literary suicides. Although this poem suggests that Sexton envies Plath, this suggestion does not necessarily imply that Sexton literally desired to comet suicide . However, the notion of death and dying still strikes her as romantic, and picturing it through a romantic sense helps people to empathize with her situation. The speaker calls to the dead Sylvia,

And I say only
with my arms stretched out into that
stone place,
what is your death
but an old belonging,
a mole that fell out

of one of your poems? (Sexton 52-57).

By rhetorically confessing a romantic depiction of suicide throughout their poetry, these two poets generate readerly responses with the hope of gaining control over their selfhood. Sexton's acquaintances attempted to help her restore control over herself. In her biography on Sexton, Middlebrook investigates how writing provided Sexton with the means for understanding her private anguish.

Sexton's therapist Dr Martin T. Orne looked for a skill that the author could recover since he realized that part of her personal duress stemmed from her own lack of confidence. "It is difficult to communicate fully how pervasive Anne's profound lack of self-worth was," Orne reflects. "[She was] totally unable ... to think of any positive abilities or qualities within herself," says Orne (*Anne Sexton: A Biography*, xiii). Orne conceived it as his role to "help her develop any resources within her which allowed her to be a person, and allowed her to form relationships on a healthier basis than before" (qtd. in Middlebrook 43). When Sexton showed her interest in writing to Orne, he suggested, "she might try to do some writing about her experiences in treatment" since it could "help others with similar difficulties feel less alone" (Middlebrook 42). He encouraged this skill of writing more than anyone else had ever encouraged her before, and he helped her sign up for her first poetry workshop. Writing poetry helped Sexton realize how she could communicate her feelings of strife to readers.

In her poem "Wanting to Die," she reveals how she feels life as unbearable. "Wanting to Die" begins with the poet addressing "you" which immediately implicates readers into the text, thereby creating an intimacy between the reader and speaker: "Since you ask, most days I cannot remember. / I walk in my clothing, unmarked by that voyage. / Then the almost unnamable lust returns" (Sexton 1- 3).

This poem begins by identifying readers in the centre of a confession, in which the poet responds to the reader's presumed question: why would the poet want to die? The speaker answers this question with no definitive answer, and describes the wish of death

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as an unnamable lust, indicating that the desire to die is an addiction. The poet says,

Death's a sad Bone; bruised, you'd say,
and yet she waits for me, year after year,
to so delicately undo an old wound,
to empty my breath from its bad prison (Sexton 24-27).

I think that Ann Sexton attempts at communicating her death wish through displaying her grief of Silvia's death ,and her desire transmitting her thoughts and feelings of suicidal action. The readers' presumed identification with her poetry forms part of her psychological recovery.

Conclusion:

Confessional poetry is one of the prominent poetic trends in the fifties and sixties of the twentieth century. It emerged out of the social and political turmoil that overwhelmed America after the end of the Second World War. The most eminent poets of that period were Frank O'Hara, Ann Sexton, and Robert Lowell. These poets expressed their strife at exploring their identity and repressed desire through the confessional 'I'. They revealed their private world through their confessional voice in the poetic space. Furthermore, Their confessional poetry uncovers their skilful technique of employing poetic language in expressing their private and even secret world.

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شعرية الضمير انا الشخصي: الصوت الاعترافي في قصائد امريكية حديثة مختارة

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المستخلص

شهد النصف الثاني من القرن العشرين انبثاق نزعة شعرية في التعبير عن الذات ألا وهي الشعر الاعترافي. مهدت ثلاثة ظواهر مختلفة لهذا الشعر: حركة الحقوق المدنية و الحراك الاجتماعي الغربي وتطبيب المثلي. أدت هذه الظواهر الى ردة فعل شديدة نحو المنظومة المعتمدة في العلاقات ألا وهي المنظومة التي تعتمد اختلاف الجنسين. وكان الشعر الاعترافي تجسيدا لردة الفعل تلك. يتناول هذا البحث شعرية الأنا في الشعر الاعترافي عند فرانك اوهارا وروبرت لويل و ان سيكستون. تعكس القصائد المختارة لهؤلاء الشعراء اسرارهم الشخصية وصراهم النفسي ورفضهم المضمحل لواقعهم السياسي البائس. وأهم نتائج هذا البحث هي ان هؤلاء الشعراء يعبر عن استكشافهم لدواتهم من خلال صوتهم الاعترافي.