
Literary Movements: The Path to Confessional Poetry

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Abstract

In this paper, my main objective is to focus on literary movements, leading to the birth of American confessional poetry. I venture to argue for the dynamics of interaction/rupture, repositioning confessional poetry within the mid-twentieth century literary map. I seek to illuminate the substantial effect of Romanticism, Formalism and Modernism in what would be labeled the confessional school, and spot the light on the major founding figures that have set the pillars of a new style of writing. The 'Middle Generation' poets, as Philip McGowan calls them, Robert Lowell, John Berryman, W.D. Snodgrass, Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton are among the eminent contributors to the emergence of confessional poetry in America in the late 1950s. In so doing, I will offer an insightful understanding of the construction of this new 'subgenre' through a deep scrutiny of male and female poets' life stories, career challenges and works.

Keywords: Romanticism; Formalism; Modernism; Confessional poetry; Subjectivity; Middle Generation poets; Autobiography

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Introduction

Poetry has been the medium through which the poet is capable of translating feelings, moods, and thoughts. Bill Moyers argues that poetry is “news of the mind, news of the heart.”¹ It mirrors the social, political and personal changes which occur in any culture. Rita Dove states that “poetry gives [the readers] an opportunity to think about [themselves] as human beings on this planet and what [they] mean to each other” (qtd. in Cuccinella xvi). The power of verse resides in touching the very heart of issues that the reader feels attached to. American poetry, after the Second World War, witnessed a remarkable change at the level of themes and structure. There was a shift to a poetry which is “decentralized, richly varied, and difficult to summarize” (VanSpanckeren 79).

Confessional poetry emerged in the late 1950s, “designat[ing] a type of narrative and lyric verse, given impetus by Robert Lowell’s *Life Studies*² (1959), which deals with the facts and intimate mental and physical experience of the poet’s own life” (Abrams 45). It is noteworthy that “[t]he confessional mode has been a way of expressing the deepest feelings of love, anger, rage, loneliness, and happiness throughout poetry” (93) as Pipos and Cristescu argue in their essay “Sylvia Plath and the “I” of the Confessional Mode.” Its main characteristics are the use of the first-person narrative, sophisticated craftsmanship, taboo issues and autobiography. It covers hot-button subject matters in which American society is bogged down. This new movement emerged to widen the literary scene by uncovering newly-evoked topics. It is recognized as the poetry of the personal since it articulates the poet’s own experience in life. It foreshadows his or her repressed emotions, suppressed anguish and inner struggle to find a voice. Irving Howe provides a thorough definition of confessional poetry; it is “the one, in which the writer speaks to the [reader] telling him something about his life. It unmask[s] the poet’s true nature and provides an insight into his private life” (qtd in Parab 601).

- ***From Formalism to American Confessionalism***

Formalism within American poetry is classified by Richard Gray into different types: the “serious wit” of Richard Wilburn, the “metaphysical sensibility” of Stanley Kunitz, the “mentally energetic” of Howard Nemerov to the more “idiomatic” formalism of Reed Whittermore (254). These diverse trends of formalism led to a more personal kind of poetry. In this context; Adrienne Rich argues: “I have been increasingly willing ... to let the unconscious offer its material” (qtd. in Gray R. 252). Her statement mirrors a general spirit of poets, moving towards a more open and personal poetry. The shift from formal to free verse³ forms is what characterizes the poets of the late 1950s. The resurrection of the personal in American poetry was detected through poets of conscious, unconscious as well as poets of confessional mode. Richard Hugo⁴, Donald Hall⁵, Robert Bly⁶ corroborated with confessional poets like Elizabeth Bishop (1911-1979) and Theodore Roethke⁷ (1908-1963) to initiate their poems with a formalist-based versification.

- ***The Break from Modernism and the Influence of Romanticism***

¹ Catherine Cuccinella, ed. Introduction. *Contemporary American Women Poets: An A-to-Z Guide*. London: Greenwood Press, 2002, p. xvi. Print.

² Will be referred to as *LS*.

³ Unlike formal verse structure, which hinges on following “rules” in terms of rhyme and meter, free verse is defined as the “kind of poetry that does not conform to any regular meter: the length of its lines is irregular... Instead of a regular metrical pattern it uses more flexible” (qtd. in Baldick p. 101-102).

⁴ The poet of the conscious along with Karl Shapiro and Louis Simpson who “dramatized the personal in more discursive, conscious forms” (See Gray R. p. 251).

⁵ Donald Hall abandoned traditional forms in “My Son, My Executioner,” to plunge into a “fluent and relaxed measures” as in “The Town of Hill” and “Maple Syrup.” (See Gray R. p. 253).

⁶ Robert Bly in *The Light Around the Body* (1967) was a poet who delved into the unconscious in postwar America (See Gray R. p. 251).

⁷ *Open House* (1941) is Roethke’s first volume of poetry that parallels his use of traditional and formal verse form (See Gray R. p. 255).

Poetry witnessed the rise of modernism in a Western world, devastated by the horrors of World War I. As a broad movement, it encompasses an ‘avant-garde’ literature and different artistic manifestations in the wake of the twentieth century. Modernist literature is known for its rupture with nineteenth century poetic traditions in versification along with the writer-reader contract (Baldick 159). Modernism also strives to dissociate the artist from other movements such as “realism, materialism, traditional genre and form, with notions of cultural apocalypse and disaster. Its social content is characteristically *avant-garde* or bohemian” (Childs and Fowler 145). The modernist within this newly-born twentieth century literary movement is through the lenses of Ezra Pound “the antennae of the race”, whereas “the bullet-headed many will never learn to trust their great artists” (qtd. in Childs and Fowler 145).

These definitions go hand in hand with Lowell’s influence and break from modernism. What is meant by providing these definitions is to trace the fact that confessional poetry has veered from ‘traditional’ poetry. No one can deny the fact that modernism constitutes the point of departure for Robert Lowell and John Berryman in their understanding of the magic realm of prosody. Despite being influenced by modernists, Lowell -when pioneering a new movement, began to swerve it away both in form and content. The advancement of the confessional school is a backlash to the depersonalized poetry of T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound and W. H. Auden. If modernists believe that there is no room for the implication of the self in poetry, confessional poets tend to fill their works with intimate and private details of their lives. The bulk of the new genre hinges on replicating the poet’s current events, be it happy or sad, simple or complex. He or she finds solace in presenting “sometimes shocking detail with which the poet reveals private or clinical matters himself or herself including sexual experiences, mental anguish and illness, experiments with drugs, and suicidal impulses” along with expressing details of the poet’s inner life, foreshadowing a move or a “rebellion against the demand for impersonality by T.S. Eliot and the New Critics⁸” (Abrams 45).

The influence of Romanticism⁹ is almost relevant in the confessional mode of poetry. The ‘I’ constitutes the hallmark in both genres, but to what extent one can confide in the blind dependence on Romantic poetry. Before delineating the affinities and differences between Romanticism and Confessionalism, it is important to stress:

[T]he ideals of romanticism [that] included an intense focus on human subjectivity, an exaltation of Nature which was seen as a vast repository of symbols, of childhood and spontaneity, of primitive forms of society, of human passion and emotion, of the poet, of the sublime, and of imagination as a more comprehensive and inclusive faculty than reason. The most fundamental literary and philosophical disposition of romanticism was irony, an ability to accommodate conflicting perspectives of the world. Developing certain insights of Kant, the Romantics often insisted on artistic autonomy and attempted to free art from moralistic and utilitarian constraints. (Cuddon 623)

In the aforementioned quote, the notions of ‘subjectivity’, ‘childhood’ and ‘Nature’ are key constituents of the Romantic Movement. Relying on the power of “imagination”, the

⁸ John Crowe Ransom and Donald Davidson formed New Criticism. With other members, they were writing poetry and critical articles through their magazine *The Fugitive*. These motivated ‘fugitives’, as they referred to themselves, started critiquing the American Southern area. Then, when they read about T.S. Eliot, I. A. Richards and William Empson’s critical essays, Ransom and his fellows got inspired by the feasibility of the “close reading” of poems. In his essay “Criticism, Inc.”, Ransom insisted that any given text “must become more scientific . . . precise and systematic.” (Beach p. 137-38).

⁹ Friedrich Schlegel is believed to be the first one who coined the word ‘*romantisch*’ that alludes to the expression of emotions in relation to imagination. The popularity of the term ‘*romantique*’ in France springs from the contribution of Madame de Stael (Cuddon p. 620-21). Romanticism is a literary movement that took place in Britain and throughout Europe between 1770 and 1848. It marked a backlash to the ideals of the Enlightenment. ‘Imagination’ is a hallmark of this movement. The prominent British poets of the Romantic Movement are John Keats, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Lord Byron, William Wordsworth, Percy Bysshe Shelley and Sir Walter Scott.

Romantic poet seeks to come to terms with himself and discover the world through a mutual symbiosis with the “primitive forms of society”.

By establishing parallelism between Romanticism and Confessional poetry, Elsayed shows that both hinge on the abundant use of the “I”. It highlights the poet’s revelation of private events to the reader. Confessional poets draw much from the English Romantic poetry, for the latter is highly punctuated by an emotional interaction with the reader. Romanticism may seem a point of departure for confessional poets as Charles Altieri suggests that confessional poetry can be the most lyrical poetry since the Romantics (qtd. in Pipoş 78). In terms of the reciprocity with the reader, Walt Whitman’s “Song of Myself” mirrors the inscription and fusion between the “self” and the speaker. The reader can hardly distinguish between Whitman, who “celebrate[s]” and “sing[s]” himself and the persona of the poem itself (qtd. in Byrne E. N. pag.). Confessional poets follow in the footsteps of Romantics. In this respect, C. Pipoş and C. Cristescu argue that “the confessionals turn against what hides the poet – Berryman, Roethke, Sexton, Snodgrass or Lowell – all of them proved that it was time for poetry to make a step back and one forward to take what is useful from the Romantics ... to bring it all to a new level of offering the self to the reader” (94).

Elsayed also mentions that the first person pronoun “incorporates so much of the intimacy of the writer” (94). Knowing about specific details of Anne Sexton’s life is determined by the “I” and its outcomes. In other words, the reader could not have known much of the minute details about the poet without probing into her poems. That is why confessional poetry projects the poet’s past, present and even future incidents. Elsayed points that “Anne Sexton’s poetry is deeply rooted in her experiences as a daughter, a woman, a housewife, a mother and a poet. She deliberately sinks into the depth of herself to reveal her inner and contradictory feelings towards all these roles” (N. pag.).

‘Offering the self to the reader’ can demarcate the absence of affinities between Romanticism and Confessionalism; while, part of the Romantic poet’s agenda is to be immersed in exalting the individual, adopting the voice of a prophet-poet, exposing a growing interest in Nature¹⁰, and indulging the self into an interior journey in search of the true individuality, confessional poets strive to object to the idealization of the American Dream through the exposure of their personal crises. Sylvia Plath and Theodore Roethke are good examples of the detachment of the poet from the engagement with social norms. If Roethke desires to be akin to a “lost son”, Plath embarks on life while displaying an overt feeling of hatred towards her father (Komar 5).

The first person pronoun is the other point of discrepancy between confessional and Romantic poetry. The ‘I’ for Romantics is “universal, generic, and can represent many identities”, while for confessionals the ‘I’ is personal and seems “self-doubting”, for it is rooted in psychological trouble, agitation and inner turmoil, and projects the identity crisis of the persona that conjures up images of the post-war socio-economic and political unrest (Komar 5).

- ***The Birth of ‘the Age of Autobiographical Writing’***

Autobiography is not restricted to confessional poetry, for many authors have already written through this perspective. From Saint Augustine to the confessional blog culture, within the American literary tradition, the autobiographical dimension is estimated to prevail. Saint Augustine, the Bishop of Hippo’s *Confessions* has been considered the first autobiographical work in the Western literature. Introduced to the Western reader who has

¹⁰ Apart from English Romanticism, the Transcendentalist movement which emerged in Boston (1830s-1840s) in America reinforces the power of the individual as well as personal freedom. Emerson, Thoreau, Fuller and Alcott endorse a doctrine in favor of Nature, intuition and individualism. In this regard, Emerson describes this movement as “a little beyond”, aspiring to ‘transcend’ reality, society and the carnal experience (qtd. in Kane p. 1). Thoreau also endorses the need for a freer soul, liberated from the constraints of society and engulfed around the arms of Nature by confirming: “I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life. . .” (qtd. in Kane p. 3).

never been used to confessionalism, *Confessions* is written through the epistolary genre. The bulk of the work revolves around the writer's willingness to confess his deep anguish of having erred. With recourse to the first-person voice, he reveals to God that he has committed immoral deeds for a long time. Guilt-ridden, he avows his rupture with corruption and sustains a fervent desire for repentance: "... I may forget my own evils ... let me find grace to speak to thee ... Woe is me! ... O Lord my God, what thou art unto me: Say unto my soul, I am thy salvation" (Saint Augustine 11).

The autobiographical tradition is also attested in Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *The Confessions*. This work maintains a confessional voice in which the protagonist pours out private instances of his life to the reader, and establishes a symbiosis with him in the process of sustaining his identity (Komar 4). As the rise of the eighteenth century English novel was marked by the advent of a readership in favor of departing from Romances to the realm of the realistic particularity of the dominant 'I', the autobiographical trend in the American literary scene was also brought into play. Ralph L. Ketcham scrutinizes Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography*, and notes the extent to which the autobiographical dimension in a number of works was common and well received during the eighteenth century. The bookworms of that era appreciated the flair of avidly reading highly subjective works, including *Autobiography* that was based on recording Franklin's passage from his childhood experience to his rebellious political agendas in 1776 (Cohen 22-4).

Such a style of writing had its roots in the American society, for real happenings attracted readers who enjoyed the authenticity that fiction writers intended to disperse. *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* is another example, focusing mainly on an "autobiography which furnished Douglass with his passport to prominence" (qtd. in Cohen 102). Belonging to a 'slave narrative' genre, this book, published in 1845, records the minute incidents in Frederick's life from sad childhood to popularity in the domain of writing novels. M.S. Lee regards the narrative as a "watershed" in the black writer's life, for it contains a thorough account of the former slave's struggle for forging a fragmented identity because of the enforced slavery (qtd. in Guettaia 29).

In poetry, the American experience has been filled with good examples of poets who wrote from an autobiographical angle. The key figures of the Romantic Movement used the 'I' to express feelings and reflect an interaction with the natural elements in fathoming the secret of life. The Augustans¹¹ were poets who produced highly autobiographical lyrics in their general manifestation of truth in its broader sense. Besides, American transcendentalists¹² also turned to replicate their personal "egotistical 'self,' social, political and even sexual experiences" (Elsayed N. pag.).

Thomas Hardy is another poet who juxtaposes the artistic thrust with autobiography. He combines writing poetry with personal records of his sad marriage experience. He toes the link between the act of writing about God, destiny with that of recording real happenings in his life. The British poet tells the reader about his marital life, and the years he spent with his first wife Emma. His poems written between 1912 and 1913 document his relationship with Emma, especially after her death. Losing her, afflicts the poet to the sense that he starts being tormented by an immense sense of regret. Michael Schmidt relates the poet's remorseful tone to the deep sorrow he senses after the decease of Emma (Elsayed N.pag.).

¹¹ The Augustan poetry refers to writings that emerged during the Emperor Augustus' regime. Works by Virgil, Horace and Ovid represented the Augustan age. Some Historians also consider Augustan poetry the one that flourished during the early eighteenth century in Britain with the predominant contribution of poets and essayists like Alexander Pope, John Dryden, Jonathan Swift and Oliver Goldsmith. Racine, Corneille and Molière were writers belonging to the Augustan age in France, too (Cuddon p. 58).

¹² A philosophy that hinges on the power of intuition and spirituality. The basic principles of transcendentalism are inscribed in Ralph Waldo Emerson's essay "Nature" (1836) and Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* (1854). These essays establish the essence of transcendentalism which rekindle a rupture with 'modern materialism' (Baldick p. 262).

Poets of World War I were absorbed in autobiography. Before the chaos of the war, many poets wrote poems that celebrated the love of the country, whereas after the battle they exteriorized feelings of anger and disenchantment. They even harshly critiqued politicians for bogging the nations down in a vicious circle of unjustified fights. The trend of replicating the horrors of the war was transmitted to the modernists. These post-war poets carried on the tradition of writing through an autobiographical perspective. A good example is Robert Frost, who resorts to the first person pronoun to uncover to the reader instances of his life. In poems like “Mending Wall” or “After ApplePicking”, he depicts “himself engaged in real daily activities such as chopping woods, cleaning springs, building fences or picking apples: typical activities of rural New England life” (Elsayed N.pag.)

Confessional poets of the 1950s continued the same trend, but the difference lies in the adoption of a highly personal and autobiographical mode of writing. The transformation has urged the poets of the late fifties to arouse an unprecedented thematic input: Suicide, sex, abortion, divorce, abuse and mental depression became their convenient concerns. Now, they started writing about topics, compatible with the sociopolitical era. Nevertheless, they surpassed the ordinary by paying due attention to blurting out taboo arguments that were considered unspeakable to the American public.

Framed as the “Age of Autobiography”, Phillips proclaims the substantiality of producing hot-button subject matters, along with the adoption of a simple poetic register and an autobiography-based art. This mixture may only mirror a movement punctuated by a highly ‘self-reflexive’ practice (xi-xii). Gusford argues that autobiography is associated with writers, searching for uncovering truth. Henceforth, this pioneering movement can be seen as an “authoritative form of truth-telling”, scratching the archaic structure of Modernism (qtd.in Bilà 64).

In “Autobiography as De-Facement”, De Mann does not identify autobiography as a genre, but as an epitome of fathoming the nature of poems. Being rooted in a number of inquiries that cannot be explained, Linda Anderson hints at the inability to distinguish between fiction and autobiography when dealing with a literary work. She relates this foggy fact to the process of “the whirling of undecidability” that every critic may face (qtd. in Bilà 64). Put simply, De Mann’s conviction that autobiography is far from being labeled a genre is intensified by the fact that it cannot answer the questions of imagination or authenticity. Miranda Sherwin corroborates with De Mann and Anderson in their rejection of the autobiographical testimony within confessional poetry. She debunks the personal content by claiming that it hinges on an “Autobiographical Fallacy”, for poetry by confessional poets thrives on an assumption of a first-person point of view (qtd. in Saunders 627). Despite de Mann’s conviction that the end of autobiography has approached, the aim of this part is to highlight its groundbreaking effects in the writings of the confessional poets, include Anne Sexton.

The poet’s self-knowledge and the leap to uncover private instances in his or her life constitute the threshold for producing a highly subjective and creative piece of art.

- ***Subjectivity and Poetic Creativity***

One of the pillars of the Enlightenment ideology centered on the position of the individual. René Descartes’ philosophical statement: “I think, therefore I am” has ever since constituted the core of humanism, culminating in the overt discrepancy between the self/other, the subject/object. The supremacy of the ‘I’ is meant to confirm the sovereignty of the individual and its place at the center of interest over any Divine or supernatural powers. In *The Voice in the Margin: Native American Literature and the Canon* (1989), Arnold Krupat explains how the popularity of the Age of Reason, the propagation of the ideals of liberty, fraternity and freedom and the prevalence of the subject were challenged by Nietzsche, Freud as well as Marx in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. As Nietzsche destabilized the subject-governed rationality, Freud revolutionized the centrality of the human thought through unraveling the advancement of the ‘unconscious’ (219-220). Marx also railed against the fact that the human consciousness can be the deciding factor, for what

regulates it stems from the social status: “It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness” (qtd. in Krupat 220).

The subject’s quest for identity is discussed by four main theories: Ideology, Psychoanalysis, Post-Structuralism and Surveillance. According to Althusser, the subject’s identity construction is conditioned by the social institutions such as school, Church, police station and army that do ‘interpellate’ it. Ideological factors boost the formation of the individual’s subjectivity, they are determining agents in the process of the individual’s perception of his or her own self-esteem, for s/he is “born into” them (Krupat 221). Jacques Lacan juxtaposes psychoanalysis and structuralism to prove that the subject functions through the linguistic sphere. The stages¹³ that he classifies demonstrate that language is the parameter for the subject to reach subjectivity.

In Poststructuralism, the subject is not a unique being, responsible for its identity formation. In this regard, Jonathan Culler affirms that “[e]ven the idea of personal identity emerges through the discourse of a culture: the ‘I’ is not something given but comes to exist as that which is addressed by and related to others” (qtd. in Krupat 224). As in psychoanalysis, the subject regains its subjectivity on an ongoing way and with reliance on language, Michel Foucault contends that the subject’s selfhood is framed by the ‘discourse’ that is directly permeated by the dominant social institutions. The ‘panopticon’¹⁴ and the models of ‘surveillance’, Foucault presents, also add to the formation of the subject’s identity in line with ‘the surveyor’ (Krupat 226).

In the wake of the Twentieth century, the perception of ‘subjectivity’ has wavered among theorists. Jacques Derrida claims that the “question of the subject and the living “who” is at the heart of the most pressing concerns of modern societies” (qtd. in Bilà 63). Subjectivity has generated a multitude of views from different fields: literature, psychology and philosophy. An analogous study of gender role and subjectivity shows that if gender looms over ‘being’ and ‘becoming’, the theories of subjectivity fall into an interplay of ‘nature’ and ‘culture’.

Mansfield postulates that subjectivity has been tackled from two angles: the ‘truth’ and nature of the subject (basically psychoanalysts like Lacan and Freud) and the attribution of subjectivity and its definition to the implication of culture and power (Foucault). The subject is either the product of natural aspects or the root of the power dynamic. Mansfield detects similarities between these two divergent orientations. He also distinguishes between ‘self’ and ‘subject’ whereby the former is excavated from any association with socio-cultural dimension that seems inexplicit in the latter. The ‘persona’ poses two antagonistic entities: the person who writes a literary work and the “second self” (camouflaged amidst words) that the reader tries to identify with (Childs and Fowler 170).

The other rationale stems from embarking on the aspect of subjectivity in ‘confessionalism’, it is evident to see the evolution of subjectivity in prose and verse forms. The rise of the novel in the eighteenth century English literature underlines the predominance of the first-person narration whereby the amount of the mutual communication between the narrator and the reader¹⁵ is scarcely obscured. In Defoe, Richardson and Fielding’s novels,

¹⁴This concept is introduced by the English philosopher and social reformer, Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832). In *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*¹⁴ (1975), Michel Foucault reinvests the term to allude to the multitude of ‘disciplinary’ institutions, designed by the Western governments in the late eighteenth century to curb criminals. The ‘panopticon’ or the ‘panoptic’ unveils how guards were forced to control everyone, within enclosed spaces, from above the “watchtower” (Sheridan 11-2).

¹⁵In *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, Wayne C. Booth argues that both the reader and the author possess ‘second selves’. Having double selves is manifested in the presence of “postulated reader” and what Booth calls “the implied author”, who seems to dominate the literary work. The ‘implied author’ exists as a ‘second self’ according to Booth. This author is the one who decides what a reader may or may not read. He contends that the reader will inevitably recognize the role of the author in any given text, regardless if the latter intervenes directly or not. For

for instance, the narrator is dimly dissociated from the author. Conversely, discontinuity is a hallmark in the narrator-author relation in Jonathan Swift's *A Modest Proposal* (1729). The author diffuses ideas that are completely different from the narrator's motives (Childs and Fowler 171).

Operating within another tradition, subjectivity has been a subject of contention, for Regenia Gagnier claims that the 'I' in Victorian literary context seems enigmatic: First, the subject is a subject to itself, an "I," however difficult or even impossible it may be for others to understand this "I" from its viewpoint, within its own experience. Simultaneously, the subject is a subject to, and of, others; in fact, it is often an "Other" to others, which also affects its sense of its own subjectivity. (qtd. in Bilà 63)

Gagnier believes that René Descartes is responsible for this division. She postulates that the French philosopher splits two divergent entities: 'objectivity' and 'subjectivity' to underline that the term "objective" is intertwined with "truth," whereas "subjectivity" echoes "the limited, error-prone perspective of the individual" (qtd. in Bilà 64).

Before the emergence of modernism, poetry had two basic functions: the 'mimetic' and 'the pragmatic'. The former is concerned with the poet's ability to reflect the external world in his poems, i.e., his tendency to imitate the outside. The latter deals with the poet's tendency to infuse moral lessons to the reader. William Wordsworth provides a clear definition of the lyric poem as the "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" and since then, the third function has become evident (qtd. in Asotic' 56). Wordsworth's definition paves the way for an advocacy of the role of the poet as the generator of poems. As a consequence, the "lyric became an exclusive subjective form, a product of a hypersensitive artist susceptible to the least irritation of the senses" (Asotic' 56).

Ezra Pound, the main advocate of modernist poetry, reassesses the role of the poet in society with recourse to an objective approach. He revolutionizes poetry through his advent of "[m]ak[ing] it new" ideal, for he was obsessed with eclipsing the notion of subjectivity in poetry (qtd. in Elsayed N.pag.). In so doing, he brings to the surface the feasibility of an objective style of poetry. In contrast, Romantic poetry is lyrical and classified under the rubric of "subjective verse". Most of lyrical poems are brief and set in the present. William Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey," manifests itself within the realm of the "personal" lyric, whereas John Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn" is classified as an "impersonal" lyric wherein the poet seems obscured from being involved in the poem's intentions (Elsayed N. pag.). Besides, late Romantic poet William Butler Yeats uses a 'mask' in order to show an obsession with prosody that allows the poet to retreat from a subjective account of private experiences. Yeats opts for "objectify[ing]" these personal moments of his own life in attempt to eradicate any trace of subjectivity in his poetry (Childs and Fowler 171).

If modernists rely on objectivity, confessional poets resort to subjectivity in their highly self-dominated poetry. This section centers on the 'subjective' aspect of the confessional poetry. The question of the subject and subjectivity influences the new mode of writing, based on confession. The rise of a new approach in the mid-twentieth century American poetry was fostered by the emphasis on a highly emotional tone, an autobiographical dimension and a decline in the distancing between the reader and author. The poet seems close enough to the receiver who identifies with the personal account of self-denial, traumatic moments or suicide-tendency attitude.

Subjectivity denotes a direct involvement of the writer in the successive chronology of events in fiction or non-fiction. In distancing himself from what he is producing, the writer is

him, any narrative is based on the reader's reaction to the text regardless of the degree of detachment or intrusion of the narrator or the author. The foundation of norms, whereby fiction operates, also unveils the existence of antagonistic entities: that of the 'reliable' and the 'unreliable narrators'. If the former abides by the fiction's norms, the latter transcends them (Battaglia p. 1). The 'implied author' exists as a 'second self' according to Booth. This author is the one who dominates and decides what a reader may or may not read.

immersed in “negative capability”¹⁶, as John Keats calls it, and he is thus disseminating ‘objectivity’ (qtd. in Cuddon 690). An objective writer is the one who withdraws from being an integral part of his work. He is presenting his work away from a personal point of view to a more distant angle. Subjectivity is the removal and effacement of the ‘self’; the ‘I’ almost disappears to leave room for an objective piece of writing. Henry James in his fiction is a good prototype of an objective writer; whereas, Philip Larkin is also engrossed in subjectivity in his poems (Cuddon 690).

This part toes the line between Anne Sexton, the poet and Anne Sexton, the persona in *TCP*¹⁷. In a much autobiographical, subjective piece of art, she uses her own voice and other female voices to silence the male-oriented ones. Marked by subjectivity, *TCP* can be regarded as the documentation of the dethroning of the ‘Law of the Father’. The American feminist poetry of the 60s and 70s aimed at reassessing the notion of female subjectivity. Art for art is shadowed, for Sexton becomes the speaker in most of the poems. The first-person voice has allowed her to undo the ghost of the logocentric force, created to entomb women in silence, irrationality and fragmentation. To stimulate an identity, Sexton’s private life is knitted in her poetry to further reinforce her subjectivity. The themes, that she has recourse to, illuminate the rebirth of a female voice on the way to become a ‘speaking subject’. Death, life, sexuality, abortion, masturbation, motherhood and madness project a period during which women have long internalized the man-made repression.

The confessional style of writing is concerned with the intimate happenings in the poets’ private lives. Part of the male and female verse writers’ contribution to redefine American poetry resides in the huge emphasis on the ‘I’. Subjectivity is a hallmark in such a mode of writing that distinguishes it from other poetic genres. The prevalence of the first person pronoun is confirmed by most poets who stress the impelling prominence of the ‘I’ in confessional poetry in particular. Henceforth, confessionalism is powered by the use of the ‘I’ that sketches the point of departure for the demarcation of a mid-twentieth century specific poetic style. What characterizes the newly-born genre revolves around the mapping of the subjective dimension in poetry in which the art of confession delineates the grandeur of the ‘I’ in furnishing the male and female quest for identity.

The other rationale of this study is to pinpoint at the use of the first person pronoun that mirrors the affinity between the poet and the reader, for the latter could not have grasped much of the detailed account of the poet without fathoming the subjectively-governed collection of poems. In this regard, the reader is engulfed in a total identification with the poet who, under the umbrella of confession, manages to transfer the inner turmoil, trauma and suffering to the public. Male and female confessional poets mutually interact with the reader through relating their personal specificities.

- ***The Emergence of Confessional Poetry***

A turn to the Beat and confessional poets better unveils the specificity of American poetry in the wake of the mid- twentieth century. By the late 1950s, the artists’ revolt was manifested through the rock and roll music with Elvis Presley, along with Jack Kerouac’s *On*

¹⁶ *The Oxford English Dictionary* defines the concept “negative capability” as a “quality of a creative artist” (qtd. in Taylor Mann p. 61). For Linda von Pfahl, negative capability can be associated with the poet’s ability to “expand the self and increase our capacity for understanding” (qtd. in Taylor Mann p. 61). In relating this term to identity construction, Walter Jackson Bate identifies negative capability as “the ability to negate or lose one’s identity in something larger than oneself—a sympathetic openness to the concrete reality without, an imaginative identification, a relishing and understanding of it” (qtd. in Taylor Mann p. 61). A close analysis of its philosophical input redeems it necessary to delve into Keats’ own perception of the term. In 1817, Keats sent a letter to his brothers to attempt to fathom the essence of the writer’s artistic identity in divulging a position in society. In the quest for fostering the poet’s identity, he argues that: “[S]everal things dovetailed in my mind, & at once it struck me, what quality went to form a Man of Achievement especially in Literature & which Shakespeare possessed ... —I mean Negative Capability, that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason” (qtd. in Taylor Mann p. 62).

¹⁷ *The Complete Poems* will hereafter be referred to as *TCP*.

*the Road*¹⁸ (1957) that signaled the birth of the Beat Generation.¹⁹ A few years later, confessional poetry emerged as the most influential movement in America after World War II. As a new mode of writing, it appeared to mark a shift from modernism. Even if Delmore Schwartz's "Genesis" is a long confessional poem and John Berryman's "Sonnet" (1947) is also another one, many critics date back the existence of confessional poetry to Robert Lowell's publication of *Life Studies* for his spearheading volume marks a radical rupture with New Critics' emphasis on the 'impersonal' and the 'formal' style of verse composition.

The confessional mode immerses the receiver in most private instances of the writer's own life. The novelty this poetry presents revolves around providing readers with details about the poet's covert events. Its main characteristics are the use of the 'I', sophisticated craftsmanship, taboo issues and autobiography. Covering hot-button subject matters in which the American society is bogged down do constitute the core of the confessional mode. In mirroring the specificity of the American social, economic and cultural mindset, the poet of this new style of writing foreshadows his or her repressed emotions, suppressed anguish and inner struggle to find a voice. The poet-reader interplay bears a special relevance to the notion of rendering the private public. The poet seems bent on uncovering secret events to the reader through the power of the 'I'.

In her dissertation, Israt Jahan states that "[c]onfessional writing is a subgenre of autobiographical writing. Autobiography is the subjective, retrospective work written about the life of the self, by the self and aims to connect the past life of the self to the present of that self" (3). The concept of confession revolves around "something about [the poet's] life" as Howe argues (qtd. in Sharma 1). Sharing the same standpoint, Christina Britzolakis claims that such poetry reflects the life of the poet par excellence. There is an intertwining between what the poet pours out or confesses in his or her poems, and the authentic happenings in his or her life. In this respect, Sexton's work "can never be entirely disentangled from the narrative of her life and death" (qtd. in Khalifeh, *Transforming* 4).

It is essential that I define the term 'confession' along with the underlying elements of confessional poetry before differentiating it from other literary movements. 'Confession' is a term, encompassing the notions of "detailed, full, honest [and] true" provision of happenings in one's life (*Large* 148). This definition offers the threshold to a discourse of honestly disclosing "full" and "detailed" evidence. In this respect, the confessor aims at replicating what has occurred in his or her world to an addressee, curious to know more about confidential instances. Henceforth, the orator confesses to an audience, thirsty to embark on a credible and transparent voyage within the borders of a confessional poet's private life.

Michel Foucault, in *The History of Sexuality*²⁰, indicates that the Western society has been endowed with the commitment to 'confess', for due to the hegemony of confiding intimate memoirs, the search for release is guaranteed. He also affirms that the contract, between the one who confesses and the one who is confessed to, is based on 'power'. In an attempt to identify the essence of confession, he assumes that it is a formality whereby the two individuals are engaged in the exchange of information. He adds that the interaction hinges on control since through the act of avowal, the confessor exerts domination over the

¹⁸ *On the Road* is an autobiographical work, revolving around travel over the USA borders. During his trips, the protagonist Sal Paradise (thought to be Kerouac himself) launches the process of self-redemption (See Thaisz p. 17). The term 'Beat Generation' was coined by Kerouac who was regarded as the first one to apply this concept publicly. He assumes that: "We are beat, man. Beat means beatific, it means you get the beat, it means something. I invented it. We love everything, rock and roll, Zen, apple pie, Eisenhower- we dig it all. We are in the vanguard of the new religion" (qtd. in Thaisz p. 18). The main aim of the Beat Generation was the transmission of a wave of radical change in literature through the language of confession (given room in poetry to challenge the rigid rules of formalism) See Thaisz p. 14.

¹⁹ The advocates of Beat Generation are Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, Gregory Corso, Gary Snyder and Lawrence Ferlinghetti. These motivated poets formed a new youth movement in favor of accessing social transformation. Their quest for a drastic move was manifested by an aptitude to address the reader with poems in coffeehouses and bars (See Thaisz p. 17).

²⁰ *The History of Sexuality* will be referred to as *THS*.

receiver's senses, so that in the end s/he functions within the same vein by falling into the trap of the force to arbitrate and give a feedback on what has been acquired (61).

Moreover, confession implies a tradition of telling no lies, for the speaker inclines to project genuine incidents, even though the path to truth-telling has been blocked by hesitance. Eventually, confession through Foucault's lens is entangled with the spirit of redemption. The confessor reveals private occurrences that "purifies", "liberates" and "unburdens" the self of misdeeds (61-2). He regards confession as the threshold to penetrate the issue of truth wherever and whenever an individual seeks it. Confession alludes to truth, though it is incorporated in a discourse of power. The process of replicating credible events is not dissociated from norms, imposed by a dominating force. According to him, "confession frees, but power reduces one to silence", and "its production is thoroughly imbued with relations of power" (qtd. in Chansiri 4-5).

With regard to confessional poetry, it is insightful to mention that M.L. Rosenthal²¹ is believed to be the leading figure who rekindles and attributes the term 'confessional' through his thorough analysis, entitled "Poetry as Confession", of Lowell's volume. Put differently, the first one who coins the term 'confessional' is M.L. Rosenthal, who figures out the extent to which confession becomes the cornerstone of Lowell's poems. In his review, Rosenthal chooses that specific hallmark as he captures the seeds of an innovative style, characterized by frankness in recounting real experiences. He also glorifies the poet's collection and appreciates the drastic change he initiates by talking from inside his heart about his bitter conditions. On this point, Lowell is regarded as the "damned speaking sensibility of the world", invading the literary sphere with the torch of the revelatory poems (qtd. in Dasgupta and Sharma 115).

After having examined Lowell's initial work, Rosenthal proposes to label the collection under the heading 'confessional poetry', for it appears to be highly autobiographical and sincere. Lowell overtly inscribes the self in the process of pouring out the private moments of deep sufferings in *LS*, seeking to assuage the anguish of his bereavement. Thus, the autobiographical aspect is enmeshed with the healing power of confession in underpinning his voyage to mental stability (Komar 6).

Treating the self straightforwardly has been propelled to the extreme within the confessional school. In *The Confessional Poets* (1973), Robert Phillips ascertains that this mode guarantees a move towards an immense 'subjectivity' in contrast to modernists' appetite for effacing "their own concrete personalities in their poems" (4). The self is thus engaged in recording intimate happenings to the reader with a penchant for swerving away from a detached approach in poetry. Confession designates an implication in involving the 'I' in the process of unveiling covert events. The resurrection of hidden incidents in a poet's life reinforces the extent to which confessional poetry operates within the paradigm of permitting the audience to interfere his or her comfort zone. Willing to refuel the artistic craft with an affinity for subjectivity, a confessional poet invites the reader to share the revelation of his or her innermost secrets.

The foremost ingredient of confessional writings lies in the predominance of the personal touch in most of the works by mid-twentieth century poets. Poems within this terrain are thought to fall into the category of truth-seeking because of the artist's flow of inner feelings. The awakening of the 'I' is manifested in a frank style and a candid tone. To be included under the umbrella of the 'confessional' wave, a writer is endowed with the force of describing confidential moments to the public and carving an autobiographical manuscript,

²¹ Macha Louis Rosenthal has read thoroughly Robert Lowell's fourth volume of poetry *Life Studies*, and inferred that it is highly punctuated by truth-telling poems. Lowell's book foregrounds the rise of a new confessional trend in American literature. M.L. Rosenthal avows 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 Asotic' p. 58).

ornamented with the first person pronoun. The confessional text is then typified by the visible authority of the ‘I’, specifically devised to parallel the poet himself.

Phillips argues that ‘confession’ has been everywhere before the concept was documented recently, in the mid twentieth century thanks to Rosenthal. He assumes that the genre can date back to Sir Thomas Wyatt, Alexander Pope’s *Epistle to Dr Arbuthnot* (1735), William Wordsworth’s *Prelude* (1799) and a satiric poem by Lord Byron, entitled “Don Juan” (1824). The rationale behind alluding to these poems lays bare that they center on the subjective angle. He supports the opinion that confessional poetry is incompatible with modernism (especially the works of Auden and T.S. Eliot), for it signals a return to the portrayal of the individual’s intimate empire. To write through the vein of the confessional means to be plunged into the “personal”; while, modernism embodies “an escape from emotion” and “an escape from personality” as Old Possum postulates (qtd. in Phillips 5).

Phillips also presumes that Whitman may be considered the first confessional poet. He classifies him as “great-grandfather”, and calls Lowell the “father” of what has turned to be categorized as the poetry of avowal (3). Phillips’s standpoint is evinced by the fact that Whitman’s influence on confessional poets is evident. John Berryman, who in *The Dream Songs*, writes to the American poet: “[B]e with me, Whitman, maker of catalogues: / for the world invades me again”, and Theodore Roethke who also turns to Whitman’s poetry so they eventually retain “courage” from him (qtd. in Phillips 3).

The list of ‘Middle Generation’ poets exceeds the poets that this paper concentrates on, but the next focus will be on the founding figures, mainly Robert Lowell, John Berryman and William De Witt Snodgrass share the same inner sufferings with Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton. These confessional poets are seeking self-fulfillment through the act of writing about authentic moments of their deep agony, though knowing that death would not be a matter of coincidence, but a bitter choice²².

1. Robert Lowell: The ‘Father’ of the Confessional School

Although Phillips classifies Lowell as the second-rate founder of the epoch where confessional writing spread, as mentioned above, most critics refer to the impact of the review about Robert Lowell’s *LS* in the popularity of the label. In this respect, Lowell (1911–1977) as the initiator of the confessional mode, is the founding father of the newly-born mode of writing that has affected female poets of the 1950s, within the American literary scope, to follow in his footsteps. .

Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath became tied with the ‘confessional’ school. They attended workshops, led by Robert Lowell, on writing poetry, and retained the basic principles of producing confessional poems. The influence of Lowell is clear-cut, for the former Boston University poetry professor advised both beginners to write verse texts that invoke personal experiences, and mull over innermost pain (Pipo§ 82).

The tight acquaintance with William Carlos Williams, the modernist poet, and Elizabeth Bishop had helped Robert Lowell forge his artistic identity. His first collection of poems was published in 1959. Composed of four parts, the major themes revolve around the poet’s childhood, mental illness, alcoholism, family, loss of faith and the experience of marriage. “Shunk Hour” is a pessimistic poem, devoted to his fellow poet Elizabeth Bishop. In this poem, he expresses his deep affliction, for he dwells in a life devoid of meaning: “My mind’s not right / ... my ill-spirit sob in each blood cell, / as if my hand were at its throat ... / I myself am hell; / nobody’s here” (30-6 qtd. in Komar 15). The mood of negativity creeps to “My Last Afternoon with Uncle Devereux Winslow”, a poem about Lowell’s relation with his grandfather. In this poem, he reveals his deep emotional insight towards him. The childhood experience is illustrated in poems from *LS* that capture a family life immersed in instability. The presence of a domineering mother and a careless father conjure up the images

²² Plath committed suicide by oven gas poisoning, Sexton put an end to her life by car gas murder, while John Berryman fell off a bridge (qtd. in Komar p. 9).

of a child's mental depression and loss. In this regard, Robert S. Marcus points that Lowell fully replicates his bitter childhood experience and the 'Oedipus Complex' in *LS* (Komar 15).

Robert Lowell's declaration: "Alas, I can only tell my own story" translates the general spirit of most confessional poets who tend to mirror how relevant telling the accurate story is (qtd. in Gray R. 256). The rationale behind the necessity of relating the poet's own story to the reader, revolves around Lowell's inclination towards externalizing his experience to the American public. The exposure to the outer world enables him to be a good epitome of the American culture. The other reason stems from his desire to transcend the image of the 'scapegoat' to be able to immerse the reader in a long journey into the upheavals of his secret life (Gray R. 257).

LS is so successful that Lowell has become the leading figure of his generation. Not only does he penetrate the personal, but also evokes issues relevant to his time. Ian Hamilton states that Lowell confesses that when he:

[W]as working on *Life Studies*, [he] found [he] had no language or meter that would allow [him] to approximate what [he] saw or remembered. Yet in prose [he] had already found what [he] wanted, the conventional style of autobiography and reminiscence. So, [he] wrote my autobiographical poetry in a style [he] thought [he] had discovered in Flaubert, one that used images and ironic or amusing particulars. (qtd. in Komar 14)

Inspired by modernists like Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot and Williams Carlos Williams, Robert Lowell's poems were following the vein of the nineteenth century traditional rhyming scheme, for the "possible direction for American poets in the twentieth century [was] a reworking of traditional lyric forms that would require no radical break from nineteenth-century poetic convention" (Beach 23). Nevertheless, he found out that his poems became full of riddles and hard to be understood. This is why, he considers them "distant, symbol-ridden, and willfully difficult" (qtd. in Komar 13). He confesses that his poems resembled "prehistoric monsters dragged down into a bog and death by their ponderous armor" and he felt the need to cease writing through the modernist mode, for what he was writing was not heartfelt anymore (qtd. in Komar 13).

Lowell himself forges his identity within the realms of the confessional mode. He breaks with modernists' imageries to open broader spheres for generations of poets who would find themselves in poems that tackle 'personal' issues since traditional poetry proves meaningless and devoid of significance in a changing society. He reveals that the essence of confessional poetry hinges on the power of the personal. The underlying features of the confessional style that Lowell has advanced spring from the poet's psyche as well as afflicting private obstacles. By focusing on the crucial moments of the person's long trip amidst a chaotic world, this new mode veers from traditional poetry to cater to writing poems which stretch its concerns to a wide range of themes. The topics, that confessional poetry is built upon, may sound thorny for mid-twentieth century reader; yet, the movement's peak in the 1950s and 1960s evoke the ones that are linked to the American sociopolitical sphere. The outcomes of the cold war²³ have culminated in a loss of faith in life, mental disorder, incest and suicide tendencies. The detailed account of the notion of exchanging those private moments constitutes the very heart of confessional poetry.

2. W. D. Snodgrass

²³ Toeing the line between the spread of confessionalism and the dominating spirit of the cold war 'surveillance' is relevant. Deborah Nelson in *Pursuing Privacy in Cold War America* confirms that privacy was an underlying principle of Western democratic nations. Cold War America disseminated notions of putting an end to the preservation of privacy. The cold war 'mass surveillance' was executed in order to dominate and manipulate as many American citizens as possible. The best defense strategy lied in violating the intimacy of people and nations to maintain command over internal and external enemies. The reversal of privacy ethos facilitated the state's interference of the intimate realm of American private lives. The trend towards bringing the private into the public resulted into the emergence of the cult of confession (Asotic' p. 59).

W. D. Snodgrass is another writer who belongs to the umbrella of the confessional trend. Even though he declines being classified under the rubric of confessionalism, he welcomes his fellow poets. His disapproval of being regarded as a confessional poet does not hinder him from acknowledging the other verse writers' categorization within the same frame (Pipoş 82).

Bereft of joy in his personal life, W. D. Snodgrass's quest for identity is attested in his separation from his daughter Cynthia. Being away from her, out of divorce, has crippled him. In his poem "Heart's Needle" from his first volume *Heart's Needle* (1959), he expresses his deep anguish over her loss. In 1994, Snodgrass was interviewed by Alexandra Eyle, and he avowed that the rationale behind his dissatisfaction with the label 'confessional' is due to the fact that it has been equated with home souvenirs: "I never cared for the term confessional ... It sounds either like you're some kind of religious poet, which I am not, or as if you write bedroom memoirs, and I hope I don't come under that heading". He also admitted that his "poems were called confessional because [he] wrote about the facts of [his] own life, and particularly about losing a daughter in a divorce" (qtd. in Pipoş 82).

3. John Berryman

John Berryman also projected his inner turmoil in his works. Leading a turbulent life had urged him to evoke themes related to childhood, depression and suicide. At an early stage of his artistic life, Berryman was influenced by New Criticism, but then began figuring out his need to create his distinct style of poetry. The gifted and determined apprentice released a remarkable volume composed of 385 poems. The self-tormenting thoughts and fantasies of suicide are inscribed in his acclaimed volume *77 Dream Songs* (1964). Even though in an earlier section, this thesis hints at the break of confessional poets from Modernism, the touch of this movement sounds inevitable in Berryman's poem "Dream Songs", for he accorded much gratitude to works by T.S. Eliot and Yeats.

Winning the Pulitzer Prize and National Book Award, Berryman described the moments of his mental breakdown, caused by alcohol addiction. Inspired by the Romantic poet Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself", the confessional poet opted for the 'I', incarnated in a dominant figure called Henry in Berryman's poem, while Whitman's famous poem is thought to mirror the poet's own life. The creation of a speaking voice, i.e. Henry, that many critics refer to as the poet himself, sings in tune with Whitman's poem. In other words, the analogous study of the two poems from different movements unravel the extent to which Berryman imitates (to a certain limit) the Romantic poet in paralleling the personal experience through the recourse to the 'I'. The aspects of similarities lie in the mixture of the "personal" and "the epic" (Beach 164). Henry is thus the main figure whom Berryman invents to transmit his deep feelings, insights and ideas. According to Christopher Beach, Henry is a "thinly disguised version of Berryman" (164-65).

"Homage to Mistress Bradstreet" (1956) is furnished by the frequent use of the 'I'. In this long poem of fifty-seven stanzas, "the benevolent phantom" of Anne Bradstreet, the first American poet in the history of American literature appears from the tomb. Bradstreet is allowed a voice by Berryman to plunge into her journey to New England, and the hardships she encountered there. The poem is an opportunity, granted to Berryman to "realize his own voice by making the dead speak and tell their story" (Gray R. 259). It also reinforces the marriage of poets through an alternation between the exigencies of the seventeenth and twentieth centuries. The fact that this poem is akin to an 'interior monologue' addressed to Bradstreet through which the poet desires to use "a verse fresh as bubble breaks" coincides with the object of "Dream Song 143" in which the little boy vents his affliction after the loss of his father at an early age (qtd. in Gray R. 259). He confesses that he is on the verge to follow in the footsteps of his father who shoots himself: "That mad drive [to commit suicide] wiped out my childhood. I put him down / while all the same on forty years I love him / stashed in Oklahoma / besides his brother Will" (qtd. in Komar 16).

4. Sylvia Plath

Born in 1932, Sylvia Plath benefited from workshops, and started writing poetry through the confessional tone. Plath writes about family, psychological trauma, depressive hysteria and unstable marriage. According to Christopher Beach, the highly subjective poems are accompanied by the poetess's tendency to invent other imaginary personae. Unlike Lowell, Sexton or Berryman, whose poems are known by the abundant use of the 'I', Plath's poetry is complex. The female poet has recourse to punctuate her poems with both the power of the personal (through recording instances of her real life in poetry) and the hegemony of apparent "fictional personae" (160).

Plath's poetry sings in tune with Sexton's in terms of revealing her private life to the public. The subversive way, Plath turns to, is illustrated in her daring poem "Daddy" which sketches her extreme hatred towards her father. According to Plath, this poem "is spoken by a girl with an Electra complex" (qtd. in Gray R. 261). She depicts him as a Nazi officer, and renders herself a Jew. The symbolic anchorage is unprecedented in this particular poem that mirrors the personal as well as the feminist dissatisfaction with women's oppression. The amount of violent imagery is better articulated by Jon Rosenblatt who states that Plath equates the speaking voice in her poem with the horrible way Jews were treated especially: "[T]he sadistic medical experiments on the Jews by Nazi doctors and the Nazis' use of their victims' bodies in the production of lampshades and other objects" seems shocking to the readers of the mid-twentieth century" (qtd. in Beach 159).

In "Applicant", she foreshadows the void she experiences in her daily life as a wife and mother (VanSpanckeren 83). In "Mirror", she uses this reflecting surface, usually made of glass to break the old image of a frustrated woman. The act of projecting the female struggle is intentional to transform that defeated lady into a new one every day. As a female poet, she is preoccupied with sensitizing women to free themselves in order to become autonomous beings. Her rejection of socially-bound gender roles incites her to foreground this attitude in her poem "Ariel". With regard to her indelible talent, American Poet Laureate Robert Pinsky identifies Plath's poems as:

Thrashing, hyperactive, perpetually accelerated, the poems of Sylvia Plath catch the feeling of a profligate, hurt imagination, throwing off images and phrases with the energy of a runaway horse or a machine with its throttle stuck wide open. All the violence in her work returns to that violence of imagination, a frenzied brilliance and conviction. (qtd. in Komar 21)

The tight relationship between Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath is illustrated in the mutual love for poetry. Becoming intimate friends, both American female poets exchanged ideas and admired each other's progressive talent. In an interview, Plath confesses that Sexton "writes about her experiences as a mother, ... who has had a nervous breakdown, is an extremely emotional ... young woman and her poems are wonderfully craftsman-like poems and yet they have a kind of emotional and psychological depth" (qtd. in Komar 19). Leslie Ullman underlines the effect of poems by Plath and Sexton in breaking the "ground for women writers and also expand[ing] experiential territory for all writers by making female experience and sensibility not only visible but powerful subjects for poetry" (qtd. in Komar 19).

5. Anne Sexton

If Robert Lowell is the 'father' of confessional poetry; then, Anne Sexton is regarded by critics as its 'mother'. Middlebrook notes how, in one of the workshops, Holmes chose himself as the chief of the gathering. His academic accomplishments mirror his indisputable relevance within the literary circles. Being the leader of the New England Poetry Club and the renowned reviewer at the *Boston Evening Transcript* and the professor of literature and modern poetry could only accentuate Sexton's impoverished professional background ("Housewife" 491). Presiding workshops, the female artist's poetry instructor and teacher at the Boston Center belonged and worked for Tufts University, too. The man of wisdom and knowledge repelled the confessional mode that Sexton, the poet without a college education, aspired to align with.

A new class of poets emerged using poetry as the vehicle to redefine the American society and culture, stepping away from ‘impersonality’ and ‘universality’ of poetry to decipher the inward realm of her anguish, pioneering a meteoric change in the poetic style in the late fifties in America along with other poets. Holmes does attack Sexton’s texts from the perspective of an “older generation” but “[w]hen [she] put in a desk ... put up some book shelves- everything was tentative” (Middlebrook, “Housewife” 483-84). His archaic context is designed to downgrade the spirit of the growth that the apprentice has been preoccupied with. Referring to his perception of Sexton’s poetry as pertaining to the “older” realm, as Middlebrook states, ascertains that phallic systems used to displace female writers, determined to occupy an integral space within the widely man-dominated literary zone.

The workshops had constructive effects on her leap to express sentiments, happenings through words she manages to speak a ‘language’ that even Kayo, her husband, “has never once understood one word of [feminine] language”, as Sexton confesses. Kayo’s dependence on phallogocentrism has empowered her and relegated man to silence; only there did she rediscover herself, learn the art of integration, acquire the speech faculty and embark on less than a twenty-year voyage to verse and prose production before in the end she cared less about Dr. Martin, her psychiatrist, when he advised her not to murder herself (Middlebrook, “Housewife” 485-86).

As Holmes was regarded as the “academic father” for both Kumin and Sexton, detaching from the paternal law that has sometimes entombed her talent and thwarted her from advancing by refuting the confessional style she opted for, depicting her as the ‘mother’ of confessional poetry serves to acknowledge the fundamental role a mother plays (Kumin xxiv). Henceforth, if Holmes is seen as the powerful instructor, epitomizing an artistic hegemony over Sexton, the trainee; then, the label ‘mother’ has strengthened her in the face of the phallic systems at an academic level, too. In “For”, Sexton seeks to prove that she is a professional writer, endowed with outstanding skills. He dwarfs her and downgrades her literary treasure by placing himself as the holder of truth:

Not that it was beautiful,
But that, in the end, there was
A certain sense of order there;
Something worth learning
In that narrow diary of my mind,
In the commonplaces of the asylum.
Where the cracked mirror
Or my selfish death
Outstared me. (Sexton 34-5, 1-9)

Able to obliterate the traces of a ‘closet’ writer, effaced from the poetic scene, the ‘mother’ of the ‘Middle Generation’ poets excels in quelling the sound of failure. With Sylvia Plath, Robert Lowell, John Berryman, Elizabeth Bishop, Randall Jarrell and others, she encapsulates what Adam Kirsch labels as “The Wounded Surgeons” who manage to enrich the American literature with “effective works of art” (Goh 9).

Conclusion

This article has focused on highlighting the emergence of confessional poetry that has not seen light without direct interaction with literary movements. The birth of this new mode of writing was not accidental. Confessional poets’ interaction and rupture were due to a number of movements. The break from Modernism and the impact of Romanticism have been fundamental in enlightening novice poets, and helping them divulge a respectable position within the literary realm. This paper has also shown that confessional poetry hinged on autobiography as revealing tapestry for the primacy of the first person pronoun. The subjective style of composing texts has been a hallmark for W.D. Snodgrass, Anne Sexton, Robert Lowell and Sylvia Plath, whose works were marked by the abundant use of the ‘I’ when tackling themes of suicide, alcoholism, abortion, masturbation, and childhood.

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