



Research Paper

Suicide and Despair in Confessional Poetry

Dr. Sucheta Chaturvedi

Associate Professor
Department of English
Lakshmibai College
Delhi University
India

ABSTRACT

American poets have acknowledged the need for poet in America to borrow and imitate models of poetry that derived from the 'Old World'. However, poets such as Walt Whitman have ventured to look for autonomous and authentically American form and content. Many poets including Whitman turned towards the self to articulate the inner turmoil and conflicts. And in the 1950s and 60s which put the ego at the centre of the poem came to be labelled as 'confessional poetry'. The writers grouped under this label such as Robert Lowell, John Berryman, W.D. Snodgrass, Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton resented being put in the straitjacket of a label and school of poetry. However certain characteristics of these poets won them the label confessional poetry. This paper explores the common themes such as suicide, despair, breakdowns, besides many very personal experiences that came to be placed at the centre of the lyric making it sound like a confession.

KEYWORDS confessional poetry, despair, lyric, subjective, therapeutic poetry

Received 17 Jan, 2022; Revised 28 Jan, 2022; Accepted 31 Jan, 2022 © The author(s) 2022.

Published with open access at www.questjournals.org

I. INTRODUCTION

Confessional poetry came in as a revolution in American poetry. Whitman confessed that **Leaves of Grass** is an attempt to "put a person, a human being... freely, fully and truly on record." The poetry of the 1950s went further and placed the "naked ego" at the centre of the poem. This corpus of poetry was described by M.L. Rosenthal as confessional poetry. Never before had private and taboo subjects as Sylvia Plath called them been celebrated so openly in poetry. A confessional poem may be accurately summed up as a 'Song of Myself'. And the self which is revealed to the reader in most such poetry is the tortured, mentally disturbed or the suicidal poet's self. This persona compulsively expresses with great candour his sense of alienation from the rest of society and what he/she has been through. All happenings in one's life with referents such as parent's name, place of residence etc. began to be listed down in poetry. Therefore an attempt to colonize new experience for poetry was undertaken by these poets of the 1950s.

A. Alvarez, the apologist for this school of poetry in England called this kind of writing a "breakthrough" and appreciated such poetry as "extremist". The analysis of the self had been the subject of Romantic lyric poetry but confessional poetry goes a step further by relating exactly what happened to the persona and explores the dimensions of his/her psyche without any inhibitions. Poetry in the hands of such poets became a highly personalized means of expression aiming at cathartic relief for the writer. Wendell Berry rightly sums up the major feature of this kind of narcissistic, self-centered poetry by suggesting that "the world that once was mirrored by the poet has become the poet's mirror". Louis Simpson is right to suggest in his essay "Rolling Up" that this kind of poetry reads like a personal diary. However, his suggestion that there is "no sense of community" in such poetry is questionable.⁵ Confessional poets themselves have expressed the generic nature of their poetry. Anne Sexton, who was continuously analysing herself as a poet in her work said in one of her powerful poems 'With Mercy for the Greedy':

... This is what poems are:
With mercy
for the Greedy
they are the tongue's wrangle,
the world's pottage, the rat's star.

Anne Sexton's poem is a plea to all critics of such subjective poetry. She is aware that poems are very often the “tongue's wrangle” but these “greedy” souls are to be forgiven for they are hungry and emotionally starved.

Allen Ginsberg described this kind of poetry as “journal notations put together conveniently”. The confessional urge in these poets was acknowledged by Robert Lowell in an interview with A. Alvarez where he admitted that the arts are in a funny situation and yet “what we want to say is the confusion and sadness and incoherence of the human condition”. He accurately expressed the common themes of this generation of poets in one of his poems saying that “... really we had the same life/ the generic one/ our generation offered.” And Bruce Bawer has suggested that the generation being referred to here is the Middle Generation poets which included Delmore Schwartz, Randall Jarrell, John Berryman and Robert Lowell. Therefore this kind of poetry is symptomatic of the age these poets were living in and tries to capture a painful cultural moment. The sense that everything is futile attains in such poetry the status of an ideology.

The New Content of Poetry: The Personal

Subjects that were considered too personal and embarrassing for serious art came to be included in poetry. Robert Lowell made the themes of poetry his disturbed marital life and wrote freely about his tranquilizers. Anne Sexton revealed in poetry her disturbed life as a wife, daughter and mother. Her visits to the psychiatrist and hospitals. She used unprecedented themes for poetry for instance: ‘In Celebration of my Uterus’. Sylvia Plath who was a follower of Lowell expressed in poetry her rage against a dominating father and expressed the anguish of a poet- wife and poet- mother.

The autobiographical nature of such poetry is its outstanding feature. However, confessional poets have on various occasions said that what is stated as a fact of life may be fictional. Robert Lowell said in an interview with Frederick Seidel that though the reader was to imagine that he was getting the real Robert Lowell, “he should be aware that there is a great deal of tinkering with fact”. Anne Sexton too in her 1973 interview said that there may be elements of fiction stated like facts in their poetry. For instance, her poem “For Johnny Pole on the Forgotten Beach” is a poem for a brother lost in the Second World War. However, Anne Sexton in her actual life had no real brother yet the capability to feel what others have experienced may make a confessional poet state things like facts.

It has been a tradition to compare confessional poetry with other lyrical poetry such as that of the Romantic era. However, this kind of poetry differs from that genre of poetry. Unlike the Romantic lyric confessional poetry uses a free form. The spiritual rootlessness of America had forced people to look inwardly towards the self. And the self was a turmoil- laden life quite unlike the confessional persona of G.M. Hopkins' poetry who had the Roman Catholic religion to support him and to structure his poetry within the limits of permissible self- dramatization. The confession aimed at in confessional poetry is not the religious confession and absolution but what A.R. Jones has suggested as the confession of a psychiatric patient lying on an analyst's couch, revealing his psyche with a rebellious energy.

In turning towards the self as the centre of poetry, these poets blatantly go against the Eliotian virtue of impersonality. Poetry has become both the “turning loose of emotions” and “the expression of personality”. While Eliot believed that the creating self and the suffering self ought to be separate, these poets made their self the narrative. Robert Phillips has summed up the characteristics of confessional poetry calling it subjective, an expression of personality and therapeutic. Its emotional content is “personal” and is often a narrative which portrays “unbalanced and alienated protagonists”.

The Excesses of Confessional Poetry

The various charges against confessional poetry include the gargantuan solipsism, narcissism, mirror-gazing and exhibitionism. John Ashberry rightly sums up the practice of all these in his poem 'The Old Things That Can Save America':

I know that I braid too much my own
Snapped-off perceptions of things as they come to me,
They are private and always will be

The pre- occupation with the self has become colossal. Christopher Lasch in **The Culture of Narcissism** traces the growth of this phenomenon suggesting that:

To live for the moment is the prevailing passion – to live for yourself, not for your predecessors or posterity. We are fast losing that sense of historical continuity, the sense of belonging to a succession of generations originating in the past stretching into the future.

Lasch in his analysis of narcissism has pointed out to what Jim Hogan in his book has called the “collective narcissism syndrome”. To live for the moment is the cry of all mankind and the “private performance” draws all our attention. The memories of the Nazi holocaust, the threat of nuclear annihilation can be seen as what Lasch calls the “historical substance” of our age. And poets started retreating towards the self to express through the holocaust within the holocaust without.

The celebration and critique of contemporary decadence form a prominent part of confessional poetry. Allen Ginsberg's 'Howl' which is considered a confessional poem by many critics begins with the famous lines that remind us not only of the Beat poet's rage and pity at the contemporary situation but also the rage and pity at the contemporary situation but also the rage and pity of a confessional:

I saw the best minds of my generation
Destroyed by madness.

Starving, hysterical, naked.

Not only Ginsberg but many other poets such as Robert Lowell and others indulged in what the Russians call "samokritika" (self-criticism) in the sixties and seventies.

The Obsession with the Self in Confessional Poetry

The major themes of confessional poetry are visits to hospitals and asylums as seen in Anne Sexton's 'You Doctor Martin' and 'Said the Poet to the Analyst'. Robert Lowell's 'Waking in the Blue' and John Berryman's 'Hell Poem' in 'Love and Fame' similarly engage with the personal trauma of a diseased self. The analysis of the poet's relations with his/her mother and father became a common theme due to an identical psychiatric and family history. This kind of probing the psyche of the persona is evident in Robert Lowell's collection 'Life Studies'; Anne Sexton's poem 'The Double Image'; Sylvia Plath's 'Daddy' and in Berryman's. Neurotic experiences and recollection of suicide attempts often form the sordid core of certain poems of this mode. The confessionals were not just analysts of their poetry but also of their schizophrenic mind. Anne Sexton in her poem 'The Lost Ingredient' says:

Today is made of yesterday, each time I steal
Toward rites I do not know, waiting for the lost
Ingredient, as if salt or money or even lust
would keep us calm and prove us whole at last.

The twentieth century witnessed an increase in the various kinds of psychiatric problems in America and elsewhere. Most confessional poets of America had been psychiatric patients. For this reason many critics have gone to the extent of saying that their poems read like 'case histories'.

Anne Sexton who had suffered fits of anxiety was advised by her psychiatrist to write poetry as a form of psychotherapy and this proved successful to an extent. But when matters in their personal life did not smoothen out, these poets (most of them) committed suicide. Anne Sexton suffered as she states in her verse due to an inability to believe in God. Sylvia Plath felt her creativity smothered by responsibilities of a mother and wife while John Berryman who also ended as a suicide was not happy with fame.

Robert Lowell (1917-77), who is considered the pioneer of this kind of poetry, wrote in his poem 'Epilogue', "Yet why not say what happened" while being conscious of the fact that most of his poems seem to be snapshots "heightened from life/yet paralyzed by fact" ('Epilogue'). Mythical systems used by him in his early formalistic writing such as 'The Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket' are abandoned with a bang in his poetry of the middle period. David Kalstone rightly suggests in his study **Five Temperaments** that, "No poet since Whitman has made such continuous public revisions of his life". The elements of myth are replaced by the facts of his life such as his family, his house, his visits to hospitals and his conceptions etc. The early poetry Lowell and his fellow poets were writing, he felt was "divorced from the culture".

Life Studies (1959) was the first breakthrough into the realm of such autobiographical and unconventional poetry. The poems are described by Lowell in a letter to Randall Jarrell as "all very direct and personal". The collection opens with the poem 'Beyond the Alps' which describes a train journey from Rome to Paris. This is to be seen as a symbolic journey from the city of priests and Catholicism to the city of arts and artists. He was moving away from the poetry that uses rhetorical effects to the poetry of simple statement. In **Life Studies**, as Irvin Ehrenpreis has suggested the poet associates himself with the suffering classes of society such as children, artists, imprisoned criminals and psychiatric patients. 'Memories of West Street and Lepke' and 'Waking in the Blue' are poems in which the poet recounts with great pain and ironic humour a visit to the New York jail for being a conscientious objector and the confined world of patients in a psychiatric ward respectively. 'Waking in the Blue' is similar to the great Romantic lyric in which the persona carries on a sustained colloquy with himself/herself. The locale is the Bowditch Hall of McLean's hospital outside Boston. It is a world inhabited by the poet, other patients and the attendant. As Lowell remarks it is a hospital for thoroughbred mental cases. They are unhappy men of his generation. This is the predicament of the best minds whom Ginsberg in his 'Howl' saw destroyed by madness.

Confessional poets have ever been fond of relating to their readers their intimate feelings. They abandon the sense of shame one usually feels at revealing the private self in the public space. Sylvia Plath had done it in 'The Stones' where she describes the place where men are mended and Anne Sexton did the same in 'You Doctor Martin'. **Life Studies** by Lowell is however not just about the personal traumas of the poet's life and marital discord. It is also about the modern wasteland that America of his day had become. This work is

historically relevant. M.L. Rosenthal coined the term confessional to describe this work. From here onwards Lowell's poetry became highly autobiographical and he started using the open form alongwith colloquial language. Not only did it change his early heavy rhetorical style but also inspired writers such as Sylvia Plath and John Berryman to use this mode.

John Berryman (1914-1972), like Lowell, W.D.Snodgrass and other confessionals led a turmoil-laden life. The poets were driven to confess in poetry the excesses and aberrations of their life to attain a kind of catharsis. However that cathartic relief was not attained in the case of many. Berryman, Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton gave in to despair and committed suicide. The attempt to exorcise their suicidal tendencies and other disruptive forces often succeeded in making very powerful poetry. They often converted their trauma through frenetic images into powerful poetry as Sylvia Plath often did. Plath in 'Lady Lazarus' recounts her suicide attempts and exults in it:

Dying

is an art, like everything else

I do it exceptionally well.

I do it so it feels like hell.

I do it so it feels real.

I guess you could say I've a call.

This kind of statement is often described as exhibitionistic and rightly so but manages to attain a powerful impact. Though Berryman creates a persona such as Henry as his central figure, he confessed according to his biographer John Haffenden that "it all happened" and on another occasion he said to Joseph Haas that "it's all about me". Henry, like Berryman felt the irreversible loss and anguish of being left alone by a father who committed suicide. A. Alvarez in his study **The Savage God** has suggested that children who experienced loss of a parent or both may suffer from a self-destructive impulse. And it was this impulse and a similar family background that led most of the confessionals to commit suicide.

II. CONCLUSION

Berryman's poetry is the most successful confessional poetry since it has achieved objectivity even when relating what happened to the poet. The persona of Henry will go down in history unlike other confessional personae. Thus, objectivity remains a virtue even as far as confessional poetry is concerned. Edward Butscher has suggested that confessionalism is Catholic due to its "fundamental commitment to the concept of salvation through agonized purgation of the naked ego". So many of the confessional poets adopted this framework which gave a structure to otherwise very subjective verse.

While confessional poetry faces the charge of narcissism and exhibitionism, it offered a consolation to those who had suffered similarly. This is evident in the increase in psychiatric problems and the plethora of confessional writing America has brought out. Despite all charges of solipsism and scornful rejections of such poetry as ego- literature, it is able to transcend barriers of nationality and is able to communicate with so many. While poets have turned to diverse subjects to give form to poetry, the confessionals turned inwards. The word has become an instrument of psychic therapy, not just an instrument of communication. The label confessional is a mere critical convenience and there is a need to appreciate this form of poetry as a therapeutic and dramatic verse form.

REFERENCES

- [1]. Bawer, Bruce. *The Middle Generation*. Connecticut: Archon Books, 1986.
- [2]. Berryman, John. *The Dream Songs*. New York: Farrar Straus & Giroux, 1969.
- [3]. Berthoff, Warner. *A Literature Without Qualities: American Writing Since 1945*. California: California UP, 1979.
- [4]. Butscher, Edward. *In Search of Sylvia: An Introduction*. New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1977.
- [5]. DiYanni, Robert. ed. *Modern American Poets: Their Voices and Visions*. Toronto: Random House of Canada, 1987.
- [6]. Enright, D.J. & Ernst Chickera. Eds. *English Critical Texts*. New Delhi: OUP, 1983.
- [7]. Haffenden, John. *The Life of John Berryman*. Boston: RKP, 1982.
- [8]. Jones, A. R. *The Necessity of Freedom: The Poetry of Robert Lowell, Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath*. *Critical Quarterly*. 7. 1 (1965).
- [9]. Juhasz, Suzanne. *Naked and Fiery Forms: Modern American Poetry by Women*. New York: Harper & Row, 1978.
- [10]. Kalstone, David. *Five Temperaments*. New York: Oxford UP, 1977.
- [11]. Lasch, Christopher. *The Culture of Narcissism*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1978.
- [12]. Lerner, Lawrence. "What is Confessional Poetry?" *Critical Quarterly*. 29.2 (1987).
- [13]. Lowell, Robert. *Life Studies*. New York: Straus, Farrar & Giroux, 1959.
- [14]. Perkins, George. Ed. *American Poetic Theory*. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston Inc., 1972.
- [15]. Plath, Sylvia. *The Collected Poems*. New York: Harper & Row, 1981.
- [16]. Rosenthal, M.L. *The New Poets*. New York: OUP, 1967.
- [17]. Sexton, Anne. *Selected Poems* ed. Dianne Wood. Boston: Houghton & Mifflin Co. 1988.
- [18]. Simpson, Louis. *Studies of the Poetry of Dylan Thomas, Allen Ginsberg, Sylvia Plath and Robert Lowell*. London: Macmillan, 1979.
- [19]. Thurley, George. *The American Moment*. London: Edward Arnold Pub. Ltd., 1977.
- [20]. Weathers, Winston. *The Broken Word: Communication Pathos in Modern Literature*. Vol. I. New York: Gordon & Breach Science Publishers, 1981.