Exploring the Autobiography as a Genre and a Data Collection Tool

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Edited by

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PREFACE

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Talking about the world means, to a certain extent, talking about oneself, transposing linguistically, in a more or less faithful way, fragments of one's own mental, spiritual or emotional universe. When the self becomes the object of our discourse, a decentring movement occurs simultaneously, an outwards flight of the, a search for otherness, because the word is always addressed to someone, its meaning being constructed, at the same time, by to the one who utters it and by the one who receives it.

The awareness of one's own self, as well as the discourse about oneself, is achieved through the words of another, because language is the product of alterity. Thus, the particular and the general intertwine, and intimacy tends towards universality. Talking about oneself presupposes a survey of the ego, of the ontological contours of one's own being, an awareness of singularity, but also of belonging to humanity, because, as Montaigne said, "...every man carries within himself the entire form of the human condition". The ego can only think in relation to the other, to alterity. Autobiographical texts reflect this duality through a perpetual oscillation between exteriority and interiority, recording the fluctuations and movements of the ego between itself and the other.

The discourse about oneself is not a verbal transposition of a well-defined and immutable intimate space, because the self is in a continuous process of construction, and this construction also takes place through discourse. Therefore, talking about yourself also means inventing yourself, building an identity. Autobiography, in its various forms, translates, first of all, this desire of the subject to know himself, to give his existence a meaning, a unity, to reveal his uniqueness, thus fighting against time, oblivion and dissolution.

In order to know himself better, however, the subject must redouble himself, distance himself from himself, objectify himself, treating himself

as if he were another, an almost impossible mission for a man fascinated by his own individuality.

Whether it is literary or non-literary autobiography, linguistic autobiography or any other form of autobiographical writing, the stakes, the challenges, and the difficulties converge towards the same issue: how to get to the truth using tools specific to mystification? Autobiographical texts form a contradictory, paradoxical genre, trying to reconcile the desire for authenticity and the artifices they have to resort to in order to transpose life discursively. Sincerity and truthfulness are constantly undermined by psychological, linguistic and narrative factors that prove the fragility of any autobiographical approach. The difficulty of the subject to know himself and to express through linguistic means the richness of his inner experiences is doubled by that of reconstructing his personal history, because the process of recollection depends strictly on the functioning of memory, a memory that often proves to be laconic, unfaithful and selective.

As a palliative for the insufficiency of memory, the authors resort, quite often, to imagination or fiction, which blatantly contradicts the autobiographical pact. Hence, the tendency, registered in the last decades, to transgress generic borders, to resort to hybrid forms of writing, such as the autobiographical novel, literary self-portrait or auto-fiction.
Surprisingly, autobiography is renewed, reinvented precisely by dissolving the limits and principles that imposed it as a genre. Initially aiming to reveal the truth about oneself, the writing of the self easily slips into fabulation and fiction - provisional and limited solutions that represent, properly speaking, a failed experience of self-representation.

The few general considerations above are intended to open a field of reflections on the possibility of existence and manifestation of a genre that has been trying, for more than two centuries, to outline its principles, limits and fix its status within discursive forms.

INTRODUCTION

NADIA ABID AND ELENA BONTA

Autobiography is defined by Britannica as "the biography of oneself narrated by oneself". It is a kind of narrative that is introspective and useful for self-discovery (Clandnin and Hubet, 2010; Thurlow, 2004; Trahar, 2009), reconstruction of reality (Pavlenko and Lantoff, 2000), identity (re)construction, and self-reflection (Kilianska-Przbylo, 2012). Autobiographies can be religious, philosophical, artistic and fictionalized and take different forms including poems, novels, letters, diaries, journals and confessions. Recently, they are adopted in foreign language education where they serve as a tool for teaching and self-reflection on teaching practices and language and intercultural learning.

Autobiographies can, therefore, be considered as a genre and a tool of inquiry and data collection. In this book, seven chapters deal with autobiography both as a genre and a data collection method. The authors selected various sub-genres of autobiographies including confessional poems, autobiographical novels, politicians' narratives, commencement speeches, and teachers' and students' autobiographies and approached from different perspectives using varied analytic tools such as thematic analysis, conceptual metaphors, multi-modal analysis and appraisal theory. The multi-perspectival approach to the exploration of various types of autobiographies can be of great benefit to researchers and teachers in different disciplines in humanities as they provide insights on the different approaches to analyze autobiographies and what these approaches reveal in terms of generic features, themes, language use and implication for research and teaching.

In literature, autobiographical poems are explored to show how poets' selves are revealed in their psychological, cultural, biological and social dimensions. For instance, Elena Ciobanu's chapter, entitled "An Art lined with flesh: Autobiographical underpinnings in American confessional poetry", focused on a type of poetry which is a significant part of a cultural phenomenon that concentrates on confession as a sort of unrestrained, and quite open, communication to the other (be they a psychiatrist, a friend or a reader) of rather embarrassing personal issues.

The chapter deals with the manner in which this kind of poetic writing brings to the fore the Self, displayed with a stunning frankness and courage and who confesses things previously deemed unacceptable as literary topics, things that had only formed the matter of private conversations.

Applied linguistics has been interested in studying autobiographies. As a multidisciplinary field, Applied Linguistics has provided analytic and theoretical frameworks for the analysis of different types of discourses. In "Autobiographical metaphors in Michelle Obama's *Becoming*", Gabriela Andrioai and Alexandra Moraru attempt to reveal the deep structure concepts encoded in the life story of a famous person. Taking cognitive semantics as a starting point in their analysis, the authors focus on decoding the conceptual metaphors in Michelle Obama's autobiography, as well as the specific roles in terms of linguistic projections of cultural identities.

As a discourse that can have different forms, verbal and nonverbal, autobiographies can also lend themselves to other types of analyses relevant to the specificity and generic features of the genre. Dorra Moalla, in her chapter entitled "Autobiographical Commencement Speeches: Perspectives from Genre, Appraisal, and Multimodality", analyses commencement speeches that celebrities deliver in American universities during graduation ceremonies. The author used a combination of multimodality, appraisal theory and genre analysis to show how the self is constructed through the analysis of the speeches' generic patterns reflected at the verbal and non-verbal aspects of discourse.

In foreign language education, autobiographies have recently been adopted by teachers and students as instruments of reflection on their own experiences with language learning and intercultural encounters. Raluca Galița and Elena Bonta's chapter, "Critical thinking at play in language autobiographies. The case of intellectual perseverance", is based on a qualitative approach, having as research instrument a personal type of narrative account: language autobiography. The authors start from the assumption that if teachers understand, through critical reflection, the whole process through which they acquired/learned a new language – establishing their goals, overcoming obstacles and frustrations on the way to attaining their objectives – they could improve their teaching strategies, techniques and behaviours used in their teaching process.

In the context of study abroad programs and the challenges they pose for students, Nadia Abid and Asma Moalla's chapter entitled "Developing Host Communication Competence in study abroad programs. A study of Tunisian students' autobiographies of intercultural encounters" explores

the processes of developing HCC that twelve Tunisian students went through while trying to adapt to the host environment. The use of the Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters (AIE) as a tool of data collection revealed the mutual influence of the different competences constituting HCC in real intercultural contacts and highlighted the transformational process that SA students went through to integrate in the host community.

While the main focus in Abid and Moalla's paper is intercultural development and transformation during study abroad programs, Sadok Damak's paper "Interculturality as the outcome of religious cultural encounters in the autobiography of Malcolm X" has tackled the issue of intercultural experience and its effect on identity reconstruction in the *Autobiography of Malcolm X.* The autobiography offers a first-hand account of Malcom X's religious experience inside the Nation of Islam, which led to his conversion from Christianity to Islam. It reports on the cultural changes brought forth by the Nation of Islam not only in the personal life of the author of this self-account but also even in the attitudes of the sect's disciples at large.

Autobiographies can be written by famous political figures to talk about their experiences while in power and when taking critical decisions. Fathi Bourmeche, in his chapter "David Cameron's account of the Brexit Referendum: What does it bring forth," attempts to shed light on the Brexit referendum held on 23 June 2016 from the point of view of David Cameron, the Prime Minister, at the tile. The study analysed Cameron's own narrative of the campaign as revealed in chapter 46 entitled "referendum" in his autobiography entitled *For the Record*. Based on a qualitative analysis, the study argues that Cameron's own version of the Brexit campaign seems to be a confession about his failure to keep his close friends' support in an atmosphere of divisions and resignations within the Conservative Party and to gain the support of the British media despite his repeated attempts to convince them to remain in the European Union. The study highlights the significance of autobiographies in unveiling realities, whether those of events depicted or of the personal lives of their main characters.

As a summary, the seven chapters attempted to explore autobiographies as genres produced in different disciplines with different communicative purposes, discourse structures and language that helped construct and reconstruct identities and perspectives. Autobiographies are also explored as data collection method that served as self-reflection on experiences in different contexts, namely those related to the teaching profession. The

autobiographies selected revealed interesting insights in different human experiences characterized by contradictions, thoughts etc.

CHAPTER 1

AN ART LINED WITH FLESH: AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL UNDERPINNINGS IN AMERICAN CONFESSIONAL POETRY

ELENA CIOBANU

Introduction

Our contemporary world loves the idea of confession. It is not confession in its old religious sense, but confession as a sort of unrestrained, and quite open, communication to the other (be they a psychiatrist, a friend or a reader) of rather embarrassing personal issues. This is seen not only in the ways in which literature based on biography thrives nowadays, but also in the complex development of some significant artistic trends and paradigms in the latter decades. The type of poetry this chapter focuses on is a significant part of such a cultural phenomenon, as it purports, in stark opposition to Modernist injunctions, to tell the truth, as it were.

The cultural landscape was quite different when Robert Lowell published his *Life Studies* (1959), a volume considered by many scholars as nothing less than a revolutionary moment in the history of Anglo-American poetry. At that time, the Western literary scene had been dominated for almost half a century by T. S. Eliot's dictum saying that "poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality" (Eliot 1920: 53). Eliot was still alive when M. L. Rosenthal's review of Lowell's book definitively associated the term 'confessional' with a type of poetic discourse that would have been anathema for Eliot and whose main, and almost exclusive, topic was the self and its tribulations. Nonetheless, the adjective turned out to be "both helpful and too limited" for Rosenthal, who later wondered whether "the conception of a confessional school" had not "done a certain amount of damage" (1967: 23).

For one thing, the confessional mode was not a completely new invention. It stemmed from a tradition that included great figures like Rilke, Baudelaire or Whitman. The great Walt was actually acknowledged as a precursor by some of the Confessional poets (John Berryman and Theodore Roethke, among others). One may even say that "if Robert Lowell is the father" of the Confessional group, "Whitman is the great-grandfather" (Phillips 1973: 3). Thus, the confessional mode "has always been with us" (*ibidem*), even though it was given an 'official' name rather recently at the scale of human history.

Written in opposition to the impersonal aesthetic dictated by Eliot, this kind of poetic writing brings to the fore the Self, displayed with a stunning frankness and courage. The absolute newness of this poetry constitutes in the fact that it 'confessed' things previously deemed unacceptable as literary topics, things that had only formed the matter of private conversations. Confessional poets "describe aspects of their lives that most people would conceal, such as impulses to suicide, abject humiliations and lusts, and hatred of their families" (Perkins 1987: 343). Rather than avoiding emotion, as Modernist predecessors taught, poets like Robert Lowell, John Berryman, Sylvia Plath or Anne Sexton turned emotion into the main concern of their discourse, marked as it is by the presence of afflicted protagonists who are doomed to ask unanswerable questions in a futile search for liberation and detachment.

In the work of these poets, autobiography is an essential element, not only as the matter that is endlessly probed and exploited, but also as a source of an unusual kind of semantic and structural coherence. Robert Lowell once declared that the thread keeping his art together through the years was precisely his autobiography. His poems are structures of experience mediating between himself and his world, between "his personal history and that of his readers" (Axelrod 1978: 4). Lowell's excruciating artistic task seems to have been the finding of the appropriate metaphorical forms for the expression and elucidation of the meanings of his biographical issues. Art and life, in Lowell's thought, entertained a complex interrelationship: "his life made his writing possible, and the ability to write saved his life and gave it meaning" (Axelrod 1978: 6). Art is in fact the result of the working up of experience into form, and this, in turn, bestows meaning on the life out of which that experience was extracted. It appears that "Autobiography, with its basically stable theory of causation, its firm checks upon reality and dream, its ordered sense of past, present, and future, was for him a necessary condition for continued survival" (Chiasson 2017). In a similar manner, Sylvia Plath repeatedly declared in her journal that "the colossal job of merely living" (Plath 2000:

184) could never be enough for her. Her true existence depended on how well she would manage to satisfy her "urge to excel in one medium of translation and expression of life". She desperately confessed to herself: "I can't be satisfied with the colossal job of merely living. Oh, no, I must order life in sonnets and sestinas and provide a verbal reflector for my 60-watt lighted head" (Plath 2000: 184). Plath achieves her poetic masterpieces only after numerous painful attempts to create "a rich and meaningful pattern" (Plath 2000: 342) able to express and contain the "one vulnerable spot in the hard, frozen, acrid little core" (Plath 2000: 152) in herself. Her diaries abundantly offer proofs of her anxious complaining about her inability to use "all the wasteful accident of life" (Plath 2000: 342) in order "to articulate the vague seething desires" (Plath 2000: 151) in her.

1. Unhealable wounds

The energy fuelling such desires to turn life into words on a page seems to have been intimately linked with the psychological issues that tormented these poets throughout their lives. Coincidentally or not, most of those belonging to the Confessional school suffered from mental illnesses that often led them to episodes of intense suffering and, eventually, suicide.[1] Diagnosed as manic-depressive, most of these poets were prone to unimaginable depths of pain that often turned them into patients of psychiatric hospitals in the wake of more or less successful suicide attempts.

Robert Lowell spent his life in and out of such institutions, and, in the periods of relative sanity, his relations with his family were dramatically affected by the consequences of the recurring crises he could not really contain: "When he was manic, Lowell smashed wineglasses and schemed to marry near-strangers. In recovery, his depressions were severe, his remorse profound, the work of repairing the relationships he'd damaged unrelenting. But the metaphors that came so quickly to hand could again be tamed and put to use." (Chiasson 2017). His verse openly approaches such issues, with sincerity and self-irony. In *Home After Three Months Away*, the poetic voice touchingly addresses his relationship with his infant daughter whose reassuring joy at his coming home makes him feel regret and responsibility:

[1] To give just a few examples, Sylvia Plath gassed herself in 1963 in her London flat, while her two children were sleeping in the next room; John Berryman threw himself off Minneapolis bridge in 1972; Anne Sexton committed suicide in 1974.

> "Three months, three months!
> Is Richard now himself again?
> Dimpled with exaltation,
> my daughter holds her levee in the tub.
> Our noses rub,
> each of us pats a stringy lock of hair –
> they tell me nothing's gone.
> Though I am forty-one,
> not forty now, the time I put away
> was child's play." (Lowell 2001: 16)

The tenderness that permeates the description of the child is paralleled by an equivocal recovery whose end is not very promising for the speaker: "Recuperating, I neither spin, nor toil" (Lowell 2001: 17). The image of "our coffin's length of soil", where "seven horizontal tulips blow", undistinguishable from weed, unable to "meet another year's snowballing enervation" (Lowell 2001: 16), suggests something incongruous with the paradigm of healing. The return to normality brings no exhilaration or satisfaction: "I keep no rank nor station. / Cured, I am frizzled, stale and small" (Lowell 2001: 17).

Other poems even suggest that this return to normality is more of an illusion. The descriptions of the figures from "the house for 'the mentally ill'" in *Waking in the Blue* are marked by the perception of a psychic immobility out of which it is hard to imagine them. Former glory and "kingly" attributes are in stark contrast to a desolating present where "Stanley", "once a Harvard all-American fullback", "now sunk in his sixties", does nothing but soak "in his long tub, / vaguely ruinous from the Victorian plumbing" and "thinks only of his figure, / of slimming on sherbet and ginger ale". Similarly, "Bobbie, / Porcellian '29", despite his physical resemblance to Louis XVI, is "redolent and roly-poly as a sperm whale, / as he swashbuckles about in his birthday suit / and horses at chairs" (Lowell 2001: 14). The way out of such "ossified" conditions is ultimately impossible for the speaker of the poem, who identifies with his fellow patients and their irreversible fates: "We are all old-timers, / each of us holds a locked razor" (Lowell 2001: 15). Such poems do but confirm the professional conclusion of an acclaimed psychiatrist like Kay Redfield Jamison, for whom it is clear that "Robert Lowell had a severe form of manic-depressive illness. When mania came, it was brutal; when it left there remained depression, remorse and the certainty it would be back" (Jamison 2017: 254). Yet Jamison also notices the admirable courage with which Lowell dealt with the pain and fear inextricably linked with his illness.

No less courageously did other confessional poets approach the theme of ineffectual medical treatment and ambiguous recuperation on return from hospital. In *Tulips*, Plath's disappointed tone points towards an elusive state of health that is highly questionable. The "too excitable" redness of the tulips "hurts" and "talks" to the persona's "wounds", dragging her from her pure death-like "peacefulness" where everything is white, quiet and "snowed-in" (Plath 1981: 160). The process of healing is metaphorically rendered as an aggression: the smiles of the loved ones whose photos the patient sees on her night table are hooks catching unto her skin, the tulips are "a dozen red lead sinkers round my neck", "a loud voice" or "dangerous animals" (Plath 1981: 162). Rather unwillingly, the persona finishes by tasting water that is "warm and salt, like the sea, / And comes from a country as far away as health" (Plath 1981: 162). In *Poem for a Birthday*, the same process of recovery is ironically encapsulated in the image of the "reconstructed" vase that "houses / The elusive rose" (Plath 1981: 137). There simply is no real possibility for the Plathian self to fully regain her sense of plenitude and balance. Even in the poems where her avatars declare their victories over the dark forces that keep them captive, the triumphs feel always unsure and only temporary. In *Stings*, for example, the queen-bee that is flying "more terrible than she ever was, red / Scar in the sky, red comet / Over the engine that killed her - / The mausoleum, the wax house" has "wings of glass" (Plath 1981: 215): they can hardly guarantee a safe flight towards freedom.

Psychiatric treatment, despite its eventual inefficiency, seems to have played a positive, if provisional, role in the life of Anne Sexton. When she began writing poems, it was due to her psychiatrist's advice during the many sessions of treatment of her postpartum depression after she gave birth to her first child in 1953. Dr. Martin Orne took over her case from his mother, who had treated Sexton previously, and turned into a sort of Pygmalion figure for the poet, the latter even claiming that he had co-created her poetic identity, as it was under his guidance that she could channel her energies towards manifesting her creativity in writing. The therapy tapes that are now controversially public demonstrate that her artistic output was indeed one of the effects of Dr. Martin Orne's telling her that "her diagnostic tests revealed that she was very creative" (Skorczewski 2012: xvi) and that she could use what she envisaged as her sexual power in writing about her experiences.

The volume *To Bedlam and Part Way Back*, published in the same year (1960) as Plath's *The Colossus and Other Poems*, contains poems where dialogues between doctor and patient are staged that show us the process of self-empowerment leading the feminine voice from sins and

conventional beauty to authentic identity. “You, Doctor Martin”, begins the persona in the first poem from Sexton’s volume, “walk from breakfast to madness”, while she is “queen of this summer hotel / or the laughing bee on a stalk” (Sexton 1988: 9). At the end, her self emerges as much better defined:

> “I am queen of all my sins
> Forgotten. Am I still lost?
> Once I was beautiful. Now I am myself,
> Counting this row and that row of moccasins
> Waiting on the silent shelf.” (Sexton 1988: 10)

2. The Oedipal nexus

The roots of such mental illnesses are often profoundly intertwined with family problems that are brought to the surface in such confessional poems in sometimes shocking ways. Most frequently, the main interest is in “the family interpreted in a Freudian perspective: the family is a nexus of rivalry and emotional ambivalence; parents and children view each other through distorting psychological projections” (Perkins 1987: 343). Deliberately adopting psychoanalytical concepts and paradigms, the poets of this school weave them in their texts in order to painfully explore and hopefully escape their inscrutable suffering. Damaged relationships between depressed sons/daughters and castrating or painfully indifferent fathers/mothers, between cruel husbands and discontent wives find disturbing literary expressions.

The tensions in the Lowell household while Robert was a child made him experience alternating bouts of rage and gloom, and his confessional poems make no secret of his mother’s domineering nature or of his father’s ineffectual presence. In *Commander Lowell*, the poetic voice bitterly remembers how

> “There were no undesirables or girls in my set,
> When I was a boy at Mattapoiset –
> Only Mother, still her Father’s daughter.
> Her voice was still electric
> With a hysterical, unmarried panic,
> When she read to me from the Napoleon book.” (Lowell 1977: 76)

His mother’s dissatisfaction with her husband is echoed in the child’s shame at his father’s eccentric appearance in places where he is obviously not at ease at all: “He wasn’t at all ‘serious,’ / when he showed up on the

golf course, / wearing a blue serge jacket and numbly cut / white ducks he'd bought / at a Pearl Harbour commissariat…" (Lowell 1977: 76). At first having been a naval officer, Commander Lowell turns out to be incapable of managing his professional life and successively loses various jobs, thus rendering his family financially vulnerable. His son sadly narrates the degradation of his life, which appears all the more regrettable when compared to his initial success. Yet, it is impossible now to find a stable paternal presence in this "poor Father" who was once "successful enough to be lost / in the mob of ruling-class Bostonians" (Lowell 1977: 78). Not even by going backwards in memory as far as the period when the father, "the youngest ensign in his class, […] was 'the old man' of a gun boat on the Yangtze" (Lowell 1977: 78) can the son recover a sense of dependable fatherhood.

Combining autobiography and myth, Sylvia Plath's image of the father is far more menacing than Lowell's. True to her desire of extrapolating her experiences, Plath remoulds the figure of Otto (her father who died when she was eight and thus left her traumatized for life) into that of an inscrutable and dictatorial father whose words, gestures, appearances and deeds keep the daughter-persona forever prisoner. In Plath's earlier poetry, the daughter resignedly accepts that the longed-for patriarch is unreachable and irretrievable. *Full Fathom Five* revolves around this theme as it contemplates "the old myth of origins / Unimaginable", that is, the "old man" with many dangers who reappears despite rumours of having been buried, all-powerful and defying, just like a god. The daughter is "Exiled to no good" while she is walking on his kingdom's border in a "thick" and "murderous" (Plath 1981: 92-93) air. The metaphor of the colossus from another poem maintains the supremacy of the paternal image whose "Mule-bray, pig-grunt and bawdy cackles" (Plath 1981: 128) remain incomprehensible and oppressive to the girl uselessly toiling to reconstruct him. His "dark funnel" (Plath 1981: 187) of language from *Little Fugue* still ensnares her years later, even in the poems of apparent rebellion and transcendence. In the famous *Daddy* poem, paternal discourse is figured as "a barb wire snare", as a "gobbledygoo" (Plath 1981: 222) that continues to wreak havoc on her. The daughter's heroic attempts to liberate herself from the "panzer-man", the "Fascist" (Plath 1981: 223), vampire, devil father, are eventually tinged with a dismaying ambiguity:

> "There's a stake in your fat black heart
> And the villagers never liked you.
> They are dancing and stamping on you.
> They always knew it was you.
> Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through." (Plath 1981: 224)

The Plathian avatars are equally unable to liberate themselves from the suffocating domination of the mother-figure, metaphorically referred to as an unwanted medusa that feeds on her "overexposed" (Plath 1981: 225) daughter. In *Medusa*, the maternal "eely tentacle" superposed on religious images of a "Ghastly Vatican" paralyses "the kicking lovers" while it is "touching and sucking" (Plath 1981: 225-226) the very life out of her vulnerable daughter. Imagining herself as a sort of Electra (Plath 1981: 116), the persona is forever marked by her mother's 'murder' of her father, and by the mother's inability to defend her children against the deadly presence of the mysterious "disquieting muses" (Plath 1981: 74) nodding their heads over their cribs.

Anne Sexton's poetic persona nurtures the same type of perturbed relationship with her conventional and cold mother. In *The Double Image*, this mother "cannot forgive" (Sexton 1999: 35) the daughter's suicide, which she takes as a personal offense. She does her best though, as she takes her daughter to the hairdresser's and orders her portrait to be done, ignoring that meanwhile the same daughter whom she treats like an insensitive doll feels "like an angry guest, / like a partly mended thing, an outgrown child" (Sexton 1999: 42). In *The Division of Parts*, the persona openly curses the indifferent mother in a "jabbering dream":

> "I heard my own angry cries
> and I cursed you, Dame
> keep out of my slumber.
> My good Dame, you are dead.
> And Mother, three stones
> slipped from your glittering eyes." (Sexton 1999: 45)

The disappointment inherent in marriage relations echoes and continues those of the primordial family knot in the work of confessional poets. Robert Lowell's *Man and Wife* depicts a couple doomed by a series of problems. The perceptions of the male voice observing the room where the two spouses lie "on Mother's bed" are marked by an insidious violence seen in the "war paint" of the "rising sun" or in the ways in which "our magnolia ignite / the morning with their murderous five days' white" (Lowell 2001: 20). The chilling lack of communication from the last stanza completely erases the last memory traces of a past tenderness, itself subverted by shyness or by defiant attitudes:

> "Now twelve years later, you turn your back.
> Sleepless, you hold
> Your pillow to your hollows like a child;

Your old-fashioned tirade –
Loving, rapid, merciless –
Breaks like the Atlantic Ocean on my head." (Lowell 2001: 20)

In a poem with an identical title as that of Lowell's, Anne Sexton's feminine voice is even more drastic in her statement of the solitude involved in marriage: "We are not lovers. / We do not even know each other. / We look alike / but we have nothing to say. / We are like pigeons…" (Sexton 1999: 116). Lowell could also sympathize with a feminine perspective in a poem that comments on a famous medieval phrase *('To speak of woe that is in marriage')*. [2] Here, the abused wife tries to survive in a relationship where she is a completely powerless victim: "My only thought is how to keep alive. / What makes him tick? Each night now I tie / ten dollars and his car key to my thigh" (Lowell 2001: 21).

Sylvia Plath's poems on this topic bring forth images of marital relations that are even more extreme in their implied violence and cruelty. In opposition to the admiration and love for one's spouse that are manifest in some earlier texts, the Plathian husband personae in her later work can be merciless rabbit catchers, zoo-keepers, jailors or beekeepers who can only possess, subdue, torture and eventually kill their wife-prisoners. The figure of the husband is also superposed on that of the evil father, as in *Daddy*, where the daughter-persona has to kill both the Nazi father and "the vampire who said he was you / And drank my blood for a year, / Seven years, if you want to know" (Plath 1981: 223).

Inescapably caught in such failed relationships, the speakers of confessional poems have to endure an existence that does not allow them to perform acts of authentic liberation from their inner demons. Thus, their selves remain fragile, incompletely defined, always more or less dependent on a menacing otherness that they have to fight if they want to circumscribe a space of their own.

3. Sincerity as convention

The danger always lurking in such writing is that it may lose its relevance to others, oblivious as they may be of the personal allusions and meanings contained in the text. This is why the hardest task of the confessional poets was to open up their experience in an effort to enable their readers to fathom their idiosyncrasies. In a 1966 interview with Peter Orr, Sylvia Plath declared her admiration for the confessional mode, for its "intense

[2] This phrase is used by Chaucer's famous Wife of Bath from his *Canterbury Tales* (Chaucer 1951: 310).

breakthrough into very serious, very personal, emotional experience which I feel has been partly taboo". At the same time, she was aware that personal experiences should be "manipulated" "with an informed and intelligent mind" in order for them to be rendered "relevant to the larger things such as Hiroshima and Dachau and so on" (Plath 1966).

Success in such a manipulation of personal matter may be seen in how some critics have rightfully argued that confessional poetry derives its value not from biographical details but from the artistic strategies by means of which life is turned into art. After all, poetic meaning must be the successful outcome of a complex synthesis between experience and language. Educated in universities at a time when the New Critical dogma was dominant, the confessional poets brought into their writing the poetic principles and technical knowledge that had been so dear to I. A. Richards or T. S. Eliot. They passed from initial stages during which they tried to write poetry in the previous modes to mature phases where they managed to find their artistic voices and selves. Courageously undertaking to represent the Self as it had never been represented before, in all its splendour and, more conspicuously, in all its miseries, Lowell, Snodgrass, Roethke, Plath, Sexton or Berryman had to face the enormous task of dealing with the "general mess of imprecision of feeling, / Undisciplined squads of emotion" (Eliot 2002: 190) that anguished T. S. Eliot so much.

Their revolutionary work, while it contested the modes of the past, knew how to mould the forms of that past for present purposes. A vast familiarity with the previous literary and cultural canon helped such writers to find echoes, correspondences and partial illuminations of their topics not only in mythology but also in more contemporary paradigms like psychoanalysis. Therefore, poetic confession emerges as just another literary convention. It has elements of fancy, like any other piece of literature, and it avoids telling only the literal truth that, in itself, has no artistic relevance. Confessional poems often contain falsifications or distortions of reality for the sake of developing a certain theme or image. This is why biographical approaches to such poetry may lead to pernicious results. Their sincerity must be taken with a grain of salt, otherwise we might believe that Anne Sexton had a brother killed in the war (which she hadn't), or that Sylvia Plath's father had been a Nazi officer (which he hadn't).

Biographers and critics alike may often fall into the trap of such an approach which reduces poetry to its sources or which uses poems as witnesses in trials meant to decide where the truth resides or to identify the culprit. Sylvia Plath's case is illustrative in this respect. For a long time, the Plath scholarship used to be divided into two camps that were either on

Plath's or on Hughes' side. The fierce debate was somewhat appeased by Hughes' death in 1998, a few months after he had published *Birthday Letters*, a volume of poems entirely dedicated to the memory of his life together with Plath. Fortunately, the criticism of latter decades has cultivated much more constructive perspectives that emphasize the positive parts of the two poets' former relationship and marriage by focusing on their art rather than on the life it used to feed upon.

Confessional poets themselves took pains indeed to warn their readers that imagination was as much involved in their writing as their emotional and personal issues. In interviews and essays, they told their audiences that truth needed to be distinguished from verisimilitude when it came to their personae and images. Theodore Roethke insisted that the afflicted hero of his longer poems was a fictitious character: "Not 'I' personally, but all haunted and harried men" (Phillips 1973: 12). John Berryman denied that the Henry of his *Dream Songs* was in any consistent way to be colluded with himself: "The poem then, whatever its cast of character, is essentially about an imaginary character (not the poet, not me) named Henry" (Berryman 1968: ix). Lowell ensured his readers that his poetry was not his diary, not his "Confession, not a puritan's too literary pornographic honesty, glad to share private embarrassment and triumph" (Lowell 1969: 159). Likewise, Sylvia Plath elaborated on the larger significations associated with her personae. In a reading prepared for BBC radio, this is how she summarized the structure of her trademark *Daddy*:

> "Here is a poem spoken by a girl with an Electra complex. Her father died while she thought he was God. Her case is complicated by the fact that her father was also a Nazi and her mother very possibly part Jewish. In the daughter the two strains marry and paralyse each other – she has to act out the awful little allegory once over before she is free of it" (Plath 1981: 293).

4. The legacy of poetic confession

Such disclaimers are nevertheless relativized by the undeniable correspondences between the confessional poets' real life experience and art. Trauma, mental illness, family dysfunctions, psychiatric treatment and suicide attempts are not only artistic themes but also the matter of these lives. One cannot ignore this in the process of reading, especially in those cases where the discourse becomes highly idiosyncratic. A certain familiarity with the facts of the writer's life is required when private details are inserted in texts without any definite suggestion as to their meaning and role. Some even believe that a number of semantic

obscurities cannot be deciphered unless one does it by appeal to biographical knowledge.

In his book on Plath, Hayman claims, for instance, that many of Plath's poems "contain lines which are partially or wholly incomprehensible without biographical explanation" (Hayman 1992: xviii). Among such examples we may count the image of the black telephone that is "off at the root" (Plath 1981: 224) from *Daddy* or the complaint in *The Fearful* about a woman on the telephone who pretends to be a man. Would such passages be better understood by the reader if they knew how the telephone had come to be off the root in reality or why a woman pretended to be a man while talking to Plath on the phone? Such knowledge would surely fill in the blanks left by the poet in her text that are only too difficult to reconstruct. More importantly, though, such knowledge, together with the personal issues woven in the text, contributes to the creation of a necessary verisimilitude that is an essential strategy in this kind of poetry.

Tormented to the end, confessional poets find in their art the only space where they can access meaning and psychological relief, no matter how temporary. Despite the rational element that certainly subtends confessional poetry, we must admit that this group of poets "took the blows of their mental troughs and highs to places beyond reason" (Hayes 2013: 36). This may be due, as it has been previously mentioned, to the fact that almost all of them were affected by bipolarity, a mental illness whose violent cyclicity predisposed them to unbearable alternating states of depression and wild restlessness. Psychiatric research has shown that bipolarity is intimately connected to creativity, even though a clear causal relation cannot be established between them (Jamison 1993: 48). Sometimes writers themselves confirm it: "No one has ever written, painted, sculpted, modelled, built, or invented except literally to get out of hell" (Artaud 1988: 497), Antonin Artaud wrote. And, indeed, American confessional poets, like many other writers before and after them, found in art the only escape from their psychological nightmare. For Lowell, time would not pass at all without the salutary presence of words that constitute "a sort of immense bandage of grace and ambergris for my hurt nerves" (Lowell 1990: 362). "Poetry led me by the hand out of madness" (Middlebrook 1991: 309), Anne Sexton frankly admitted. Sylvia Plath was similarly overwhelmed with joy and a respite of her suffering when she could find her way into her best poetry.

That respite has not only personal relevance, but, most importantly, it leads writers to insights with universal value. When possessed by their demanding muses, these poets become channels through which significant

revelations become accessible and valuable even to those who are not challenged psychologically. It seems that

> "...familiarity with sadness and the pain of melancholy – as well as with the ecstatic, often violent energies of the manic states – can add a singular truth and power to artistic expression. To the extent that an artist survives, describes, and then transforms psychological pain into an experience with more universal meaning, his or her own journey becomes one that others can, thus better protected, take." (Jamison 1993: 120)

The creative process weaves conscious and unconscious levels in its arriving at revelatory states filling the poet's mind with the joy of what is perceived as a victory, however small, over the forces of darkness awaiting in the recesses of the mind. Fascinated by this source of personal soothing and writerly satisfaction, Sylvia Plath confesses to her journal: "My absolute lack of judgment when I've written something: whether it's trash or genius" (Plath 2000: 380). At another moment, she acknowledges the autonomy of the creative mind that follows its own inscrutable paths in the construction of its original worlds. The yew tree she once chose to put in a poem ended by taking complete possession of her consciousness:

> "...that yew tree began, with astounding egotism, to manage and order the whole affair […] It stood squarely in the middle of my poem, manipulating its dark shades, the voices in the churchyard, the clouds, the birds, the tender melancholy with which I contemplated it." (Plath 1981: 292)

Yet the exploration of the unconscious is not only linked with what naturally inheres in human creativity. Confessional poets look deep into themselves because they are primarily interested in understanding the source of their psychic wounds. To the extent to which, by doing this, it reflects, enlightens, relieves and gives meaning to the struggles of so many others, confessional poetry acquires a value that goes beyond art, and it does so only if it convinces its readers that what it tells them is genuine. The principle, Axelrod argues, "is always the same, the growth of consciousness and the deepened sense of personal identity resulting from immersion in firsthand experience" (Axelrod 1978: 9). The illusion of absolute sincerity is thus necessary in this respect. It remains, nonetheless, an illusion.

Paradoxically, this 'sincerity' depends on an interplay of reality and fiction, a combination of real biographical details and imaginary constructs. This is the realm where Robert Lowell lived: "where deed meets word, or in his own terms, where 'what really happened' connects with the 'good line'" (Axelrod 1978: 8). We might even say that poetic

confession is believed only to the measure to which that confession ceases to be only confession and becomes something more: a literary text thriving on the border between life, imagination and language. Autobiography becomes a trope in this endeavour. At this point, it no longer matters whether poetry saved or didn't save these poets from their private hells. What matters is that they managed to plunge into the impenetrable gloom of their psyche and to bring back from there visions of a strange, but very rich and empowering beauty.

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