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Truth Claims In Confessional Poetry: An Excavation into Spiritual Truth

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A budding writer and a researcher

“ Where was Atman to be found, where did He reside, where did his eternal heartbeat, where else but in one’s own self, in its innermost part , in its indestructible part, which everyone had in

himself? But where, where was this self, this innermost part, this ultimate part?"- (Hesse 3)

Abstract: With the publication of Robert Lowell's "Life Studies" written for the "Nation" in 1959 the history of poetic outlets took a swerve and marked as an intense breakthrough (as Plath stated in an interview) against the established, academic, classical channel of poetic tradition of Pound and Eliot and shifted "towards the personal mode; from the impersonal mode there came a shift towards the personal mode; from the outer wasteland to the wasteland within" in post war America. It was M.L.Rosenthal who first used the term "confessional" while reviewing Lowell's "Life Studies" entitled "Poetry as Confession" labelling this autobiographical body of writing as direct, therapeutic and unflinchingly truthful making a sharp departure from the earlier classical stance of complex symbolism and formal language which later came into surface for dealing sensitive and taboo topics such as personal trauma, domestic violence, strained marital relationships coupled with pregnancy and abortion. With an intense probing into the inner self of the highly sensitive persona that found its concretization in the words of Robert Lowell, Theodore Roethke, Anne Sexton, W.D.Snodgrass and Sylvia Plath, this confessional poetry emerged as a breakthrough from the shackles of earlier tradition.

Keywords: Confessional, therapeutic, truth, poetry.

Introduction

Historically speaking, the mode of confession existed from time memorial with its traces in the writings of St Augustine of Hippo namely "The Confessions", the culmination of which found its expression in the whole gamut of Romantic literature with the Confessional Impulse at the crux of it that

focused on a definition of *Self* in the historical sense as a process of *Becoming*. From Rousseau's "Confessions" with its element of the "search for the true self", or Goethe's "Poetry and Truth" with its sense of "being is becoming" following the cluster of highly subjective lyric poems of inward looking poets such as Byron's "Childe Harold's Pilgrimage", Wordsworth's "Prelude", Shelly's "Alastor" or Rimbaud's "Le Bateau Ivre", and as for autobiographies of Rousseau or Gibbon or scientific treatise like Freud's "The Interpretation of Dreams" this vigorous confessional impulse looms large since 1800. In the words of Eugene. L. Stelzig, "it is also a fairly consistent literary technique employed by ..fiction writers to achieve authenticity in the depiction of characters, and vividness and immediacy in the fabrication of scene and situation. A mode of first person narrative *Confession* is a sophisticated strategy that can make for a highly effective-affective bond or identification between audience and character by diminishing or collapsing the fictive gap between them, so that life and art, the reader's and speaker's experience appear to be aligned on the same plane." After Rousseau the confessional mode of writing underwent a sea change and as Northrop Frye remarks, "the confession flows into the novel and the mixture produces the fictional autobiography" Thus, in case of fictitious confessions of which the narrator is marked as an imaginary confessor as in Gogol's "Diary of a madman", Mary Shelly's "Frankenstein", Dickens' "Great Expectations", Dostoevsky's "Notes from Underground", Salinger's "The Catcher in the Rye" or Sylvia Plath's "The Bell Jar" or even Turner's actual prison confessions "which always purport to be true confessions can be even more vivid and convincing than the veritable and verifiable sort so art triumphs over life" (Stelzig 19).

Confession as a mode of thinking

Confession simply means an acknowledgement of one's sins. It is making known one's fault, crimes, wrongs, weaknesses and guilt. Thus, the confessional urge is inherent in Christianity where a sinner confesses to the priest in a confidential manner in order to fulfilling oneself or seek pardon throughout self expression. So, as a private utterance, as an admission of lapses, wrong doings and feelings one would not normally express it in public.

However, in this present essay we need to look deeper into the mode and the *religious sincerity* of the term "*Confession*" while reviewing the symbiotic relationship between the biographical and the literary selves of such poets who as P. Lal avers "felt a strong urge at that time to turn away from the transcendental- mystical stream of poetry to deal with the concrete experiences of men living in the modern world of their own time". Thus, crushing the Eliotian notion of the impersonal theory of poetry which dominated the early decades of the twentieth century, these poets ventured into an expression of the personality through biographical personae with themes of personal anguish, sexual love, oedipal hate, unbearable pain and emotional breakdown which again tingled the question in the critical consensus of the documentary nature of such poems and whether they can be valuably considered in serious literary terms.

In the words of Tegan Jane Schetrumpf, "The desperation to enshroud confessional poetry in negativity is remarkable. In its heyday critics called it narcissistic and irrelevant; in the twenty-first century it is labeled passé. According to Alan Williamson, "almost from the moment that unfortunate term was coined, *Confessionalism* has been the whipping boy of half a dozen newer schools". The legal and religious connotations of "confession- sinful, brash, illicit, begging for

censure—may be in part to blame. It is also true that the biographical nature of confessional poetry and its engagement with taboo topics such as mental illness, sexuality, mortality, and the subconscious means the poet’s life can overshadow the work. Some claim that getting mileage out of personal experience is akin to whoredom. Others maintain that neuroticism drives confessional poets to foist their suffering upon readers in order to self-satisfy. Those eager to vilify Confessionalism readily accept the confessional poet as both prostitute and recipient of the orgasm” (Williamson).

If we take into account the notion of a poet being a product of his/ her times then only we can formulate an answer while focusing on the context of the time period in which this kind of new poetry came into being. Thus, poets of this modern trend were in danger of being carried away by the social environment and felt that they can preserve their individuality by remaining continuously aware of themselves as a distinct, individual entity. This kind of new poetry is neither an attempt on the poet’s part to establish a communion with *Eternity* nor a search for great ideals but a venture into oneself. The hostile external reality which can never be wiped out of existence contributed an aroma of complexity and tension in their psychic nature and therefore tinged by an apocalyptic absurdism they burst forth in self revealing terms even to the point of being *confessional*- examining their own past as well as the intimate thoughts in a way to achieve some sort of vision.

Purpose of “Confessionalism”

David, commenting on Confessional poetry in his “Poetry and Sincerity” asserts “that poetry is an individual statement not as twentieth century horrors. This means that confessional poetry is not separable from the poet’s biography, a notion that has been among us ever since lyrical ballads. Confessional

poetry is the result of the wartime, psychoanalysis and urbanity to emphasize the poet's individuality" or it can also be viewed that the job to excavate the truth within ourselves is the journey of the *spiritual* or the *yogi* towards reaching the *ultimate Truth* of their atman. Thus, peeling the layers of our multifarious masks of pretentiousness which are construed from our desire to attain certainty, these confessional poets rebelled against the logocentric, academic, standardized poetic tradition which was so pervasive and dominant in the early decades of twentieth century by looking inward and making the whole iceberg of their self visible by nurturing demoniacal and taboo topics by baring the veins and marrows of their being in mode of a sincere religious confession. Thus, they channelized the *thanatos* by mingling it with the *Eros* of the creativity which got its climax in the transcended world of their own. Thus, the lulling lyrical voice of the confession ushers us into a mythical journey of psychological underworld of Orpheus. By decoding the symbols of the poet which must be appropriated through biographical, historical or literary reference we come into the caves of the inner psyche which is bruised with various traumas intensely experienced by a highly conscious person and confront the often latent *ill* that affect humankind, which results in identifying and acknowledging personal and global source of suffering that accelerates in creating a literary community where a marginalized may anonymously find a sense of belonging. Robert Philips has remarked that such poems are "revelations about the personal vexations and predicament of the self", the burden of which these poets bore with their sheer honesty of utterance in order to communicate with the outer world. Thus, according to Philips "All confessional art, whether poetry or not, is a means of killing the beasts which are within us, those dreadful dragons of dreams and experiences that must be hunted down, cornered and exposed in order to be destroyed". As W.B. Yeats wrote "we make out of the quarrels with others,

rhetoric but of quarrels with ourselves, poetry, therefore in terms of the truth value of Confessional poetry in a generalized view they may be regarded as true poetry for “it is a kind of quarrel with ourselves.”

The beginning of the tradition

In the words of Roy Pascal, “Wordsworth is the first autobiographer to realize... that the deepest purpose of autobiography is the account of life as a projection of real self...on the world”. Thus, the modern poet unlike the romantic writers, unshackles the inner torment in the process of redefining the self and molds a true Confessional poem. To cite an example, Theodore Roethke’s “Lost Son”, a long Confessional sequence is the poetic voice’s metaphysical quest for his authentic selfhood which the “I” achieves by gripping the haunting traumatic experiences of his life and claiming it as Confessional.

“I shook the softening chalk of my bones,

Saying,

Snail, snail, glister me forward,

Bird, soft-sigh me home,

Worm, be with me.....

I’m cold. I’m cold all over.

Rub me in father and mother.

Fear was my father, Father Fear.

His look drained the stones.

This is my hard time.”

Similarly Robert Lowell in his “Life Studies” explores his identity with the womb of his family experiences, his relationship with his nation and his age which ultimately becomes the central theme in “For the Union Dead”. Thus, Lowell joins the dot between the hollowness and spiritual sickness of the outer decadence with the tumultuous barrenness within and seeks for stability and solace in his family background and the New England tradition of his ancestors. Thus, by seeking into his inner sanctuary of family, Lowell made his poetry “a regressive movement away from the outer reality and its broad Canvas and plunged into a narrower, familiar Canvas”(40). He writes, “In Life Studies, I caught real memories in a fairly gentle style. It’s not meant to be extremity. I agree with the critics who say it is artificially composed. I have been through mania and depression; Life Studies is about neither. Mania is sickness for one’s friends, depression for one’s self. Both are chemical. In depression, one wakes, is happy for about two minutes, probably less, and fades into the dread of the day. Nothing will happen, but you know twelve hours will pass before you are back in bed and sheltering your consciousness in dreams, or nothing. It isn’t danger; it’s not an accomplishment. I don’t think it a visitation of the angels but a weakening in the blood. In Life Studies, I wrote about my marriage and parents; I didn’t see them as desperate—though life must be askew. When I wrote, most good American poetry was a symbol hanging like a gun in an armory. Many felt this”. According to Marjorie Perloff, “it is Lowell’s superb manipulation of the realistic convention, rather than the titillating confessional content that is responsible for the so-called breakthrough of “*Life Studies*.” As Marjorie Perloff states, “His metonymic structure is far from artless and the style born of this fusion “of metonymic realism with the romantic lyrical I” marks a turning point in the history of twentieth century poetry”. Lowell also expressed a similar view about his book that although “there is a good

deal of tinkering with fact... the reader was to believe that he was getting the “real” Robert Lowell. According to Richard Gray “The success of *Life Studies* helped turn Lowell into a public figure, the most visible American poet of his generation. And it was partly in response to this enhanced status that he began taking a public stand on some of the major issues of the day, such as the war in Vietnam. At the same time, his poetry, while remaining profoundly personal, addressed problems of history and culture: in his own way, like Whitman he tried to consider what it was like to be an American in the mid-century. ‘Waking Early Sunday Morning’, discussed earlier, gives one illustration of how Lowell wedded his intense inwardness of impulse to historical event and contemporary crisis.”

In the following lines, Rosenthal comments on the very nature and thematic concerns of Confessional Poetry. He writes: “Confessional poetry is a poetry of suffering. The suffering is generally “unbearable” because the poetry so often projects breakdown and paranoia. Indeed the psychological condition of most of the Confessional poets has long been the subject of common literary discussion- one cannot say gossip exactly, for their problems and confinements in the hospitals are quite often the specific subjects of their poems”. Beach explains: “The appeal of confessional poetry was heightened by its seemingly direct portrayal of poets’ tempestuous lives. In fact, it was often the biographies of the confessional generation as much as their poetry that attracted the attention of scholars, critics, and readers. Plath, Berryman, Anne Sexton, and Delmore Schwartz were all suicides, and Jarrell attempted suicide. Other confessionals experienced problems with alcoholism (Lowell, Bishop, and Berryman), emotional breakdowns and depressions (Lowell, Berryman, Bishop, Plath, and Sexton), and divorces (Lowell, Berryman, Jarrell, and W.D. Snodgrass). All the mental suffering and paranoia in their lives contributed to the “imaginative risk” which these

poets were sensitive and brave enough to face and deal with more candidly than their Romantic predecessors and thus this imaginative risk has become a necessary part of their poetry.

Therefore, these poets resorted to open self criticism and unfolding layers of pretense, they adopted an ironic tone of objectivity while articulating subjective reality in order to an aesthetic construction and the transcendence of fragmented self. Emily Dickinson once called such publications as “the auction of mind”, but in the modern discourse the psychological self probing is termed as soul’s therapy. M.L.Rosenthal comments further, “To build a great poem out of the predicament and horror of the Lost self has been the recurrent effort of the most ambitious poetry of our century...The self engaged in crucial introspection and analysis often manages to make therapeutic confessions which led to a realization of lost cultural values”. Henceforth, the central experience of such poetry is psychological in nature examining the psychic disintegration, bouts of depression and verging into insanity and death, the end result of which is the birth of a poetry of an extremely emotional nature.

Plath’s take on Confession

Sylvia Plath’s ripeness as a poet chronologically coincided with the emergence of this “confessional” mode of writing with which she made an ambivalent attitude. Plath in a candid interview confessed her emphatic views regarding the influential effect of such poetry. “I’ve been very excited by what I feel is the new breakthrough that came with, say, Robert Lowell’s Life Studies, this intense breakthrough into a very serious, very personal, emotional experience which I feel has been partly taboo . . . These peculiar, private and taboo subjects, I feel, have been explored in recent American poetry. I think particularly the poetess Ann Saxton [sic], who writes about her experiences as a mother, as a mother who has had a

nervous breakdown, is an extremely emotional and feeling young woman and her poems are wonderfully craftsman-like poems and yet they have a kind of emotional and psychological depth which I think is something perhaps quite new, quite exciting”. However, despite this earlier supercilious surge for this mode her attitude towards it changed. As Jo Gill writes, “As early as April 1953, commenting on some of the short stories she hoped to place in women’s magazines, Plath reveals the low critical esteem in which the confession is held. The ‘true Confession’ she plans to write (which, ironically enough, is entitled ‘I Lied for Love’) is aimed squarely at a lucrative market.” Plath now concentrates on the demand in terms of plot and tone which are difficult to come by. Further she asserts herself. “Personal experience is very important, but certainly it shouldn’t be shut-box and mirror-looking, narcissistic experience. I believe it should be relevant and relevant to the larger things, the bigger things such as Hiroshima and Dachau and so on”.

Thus, her attempt to distance herself from the personal introspection of her life can be taken as a different juncture from that of Anne Sexton or through this possibly she is ready to distance herself from the labelling of narcissistic self engagement which is inevitable in its criticism. When Rosenthal categorically included Robert Lowell in the spectrum of the Confessional” I”, he included Sylvia Plath as well because in Plath Confessionalism is the mode through which she remakes herself from the chatter of the multiple selves by unshackling her sphere of psychological vulnerability and shame in the reign of her poetic “I”. Thus breaking away from her own assertion of going beyond personal elements and viewing her oeuvre in the historical context of cold war and post war apocalypse would be a surface levelled judgement and as her own husband the infamous poet critic remarks that “Plath uses autobiographical details in her poetry in a more emblematic way than Lowell.” What marks

Plath's poetry different from that of Lowell is that in Lowell's poetry poetic voices are stemming from real life characters and their experiences, baring their agony, miseries, weaknesses, ineptitude and Lowell in his self depreciating, comic and modest literary self simply exposing his literal and literary self in a humiliating, prejudicial manner which as readers become harder to judge those self accusations, instead of feeling outraged by those morbid outbursts we are rather chastised by it. However, in Plath the case is different. In her poesy like a puppeteer, she strings and pulls varied voices and dramatically molds and manipulates her several general types of characters. As her characters are type they inevitably lack the profound genuineness of their confessions and the limited prejudicial confessions make it harder for the readers to sympathize. This is later confessed in the remarks of Elizabeth Hardwick where she critically accuses Plath as lacerating and never being in her poems a nice person. Sylvia Plath herself has said, "I think my poems immediately come out of the sensuous and emotional experiences I have, but I must say I cannot sympathize with these cries from the heart that are informed by nothing except a needle or a knife, or whatever it is. I believe that one should be able to control and manipulate experiences, even the most terrifying, like madness, being tortured, this sort of experience, and one should be able to manipulate these experiences with an informed and intelligent mind." Thus, in her poems Plath is not bothered about the nature of her experience rather she is busy showcasing how the mind works in extreme circumstances. In that case, her strategy lies in heightened exaggeration of ordinary experience with an intensity "to manipulate the skills of the mind so that fathers become fascists and the images conjured up by the mind becomes rigidly ritualistic." In her earlier oeuvre, she takes the objective stance of judging her characters making caricatures out of madness as" also its counterpart hysterical sanity"- "her earlier poems are marked

by extremism of feeling and melodic cunningness of expression. “However as she continues to write she makes her characters as subjective speakers who speak in the inevitable methods of parody, caricature and hyperbole for a mind that stiffens and becomes rigid with terror. In her middle period, Plath employs another method with which the mind deals with the pains of terrors by focusing on a character who is crippled by the burden of her fears and feels out of control. Thus “ In Zoo Keeper’s Wife” the insomniac speaker lies awake overthinking her grief experiences and the terrifying horrors of her husband’s zoo full of” Woolf headed fruit bats” and” bird eating spider”. Like an early Plath poem, her hyperbolic response to her husband resembles “a hysterical spinster’s disdain for love’s slovenliness” but now she has no rituals to diminish it. She says” I can’t get it out of my mind” all she can do is “flog apes owles bears sheep / over their iron stile “and still she can’t sleep. Again in “Insomniac” the mind can’t handle memories that “jostle each other for face room like obsolete film stars”. Thus in this period Plath’s speaker sounds like Lowell in his most despairing and exhausting moods yet even here her focus is on the “function and non function of the mind rather than the meaning of the experience”.

Actually Plath’s status as a major American poet has been obscured by her reputation as a martyr, a victimized woman whose tragic life finally ended in suicide. Nevertheless, there are many who insist the poems in her posthumously published volume, *Ariel*, represent the most dazzling and productive short period of writing since Keats. In this verse, it is argued, Plath fully realizes the Keatsian sense of the sweetness of death—a longing to be swallowed up by something greater than oneself, to become part of the eternal. As Richard Gray writes,” Her later poetry is a poetry of the edge, certainly, that takes greater risks, moves further towards the precipice than most conventional verse: but it is also a poetry that depends

for its success on the mastery of her craftsmanship, her ability to fabricate larger, historical meanings and imaginative myth out of personal horror. And it is a poetry, as well, that draws knowingly on honored traditions: the Puritan habit of meditation upon last things, the American compulsion to confront the abyss of the self – above all, the burning conviction felt by poets as otherwise different as Poe and Dickinson that the imagining of death is the determining, definitive experience of life.”

A Two-Edged sword: Daddy and Lady Lazarus

The innate relationship between poet and speaker in her late poems, “Lady Lazarus” and “Daddy,” is somewhat more complex because these poems do call upon our mind specific incidents in Plath’s personal life -her suicide attempts and her father’s death. “Still, to associate the poet with the speaker directly, as many critics have done, does not account for the fact that Plath employs here as before the techniques of caricature, hyperbole, and parody that serve both to distance the speaker from the poet and at the same time to project onto the speaker a subversive variety of the poet’s own strategies”.

Just before her suicide in 1963, Plath wrote an intensely self dramatizing lyric named “Lady Lazarus” in which she outpoured highly straining metaphors and images to showcase her psychic state which was plunging harrowingly in the domain of death and dying. It is definitely a fictionalized account her suicide attempt. “Introducing the poem for a reading prepared for BBC Radio, Plath said, “The speaker is a woman who has the great and terrible gift of being reborn. The only trouble is, she has to die first. She is the Phoenix, the libertarian spirit, what you will. She is also just a good, plain, very resourceful Woman.” “The unanswered questions about the solitary journey of the body after death (beginning with its decay and disintegration) and its ultimate destination, only

serves to terrify her: “ .. I don’t believe there is life after death in the literal sense. I don’t believe my individual ego or spirit is unique and important enough to wake up after burial and soar to bliss and pink clouds in heaven. If we leave the body behind as we must, we are nothing No: perhaps I will awake to find myself burning in hell. I think not. I think I will be snuffed out. Black is sleep; black is a fainting spell; and black is death, with no light, no waking. “However such obsession with death speaks of the fact that in her consciousness there was always the thumping of the force of Thanatos in the Freudian term. In the critical consensus, her morbid sense of dying emanated from the unexpected death of her father in childhood which disintegrated her stability of life. Thus the trauma and the loss that she experienced throughout her life gave to her the idea that death would claim everyone in her life and henceforth this fear of death is responsible for her insecure identity. Thus her desire into the oblivious realm of death may arise from her innate desire to join her father which she claims in poems like” Full Fathom Five”.

“You defy godhood.

I walk dry on your kingdom’s border

Exiled to no good

Your shelled bed I remember

Father, this thick air is murderous

I would breathe water.”

Or it is Plath’s phoenix-like desire to be born again brushing aside her insecure self, but in order to be reborn she must die first. Thus in her poetry Plath, through her fanciful death wish, is engaged in conceiving a self that is in power of her own identity. In “Ariel” she speaks,

“Stasis in darkness.

*Then the substanceless blue
Pour of tor and distances.
God's lioness,
How one we grow,
Pivot of heels and knees”*

Thus this notion of rebirth which is purely an Eastern notion is anomalous in the Christian and western notion of her writing. Plath appropriated rebirth as a necessity to avenge her tormentors especially her husband poet critic Ted Hughes who came into her life as a return of her feeling of uncanny like a murderous vampire to suck the vitality of her life by betraying and abandoning. Finally death became her elixir to save her from the unbearable burden of existence, and thus in death she sought for solace. She asserts, “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. “Her failures at each deed, is described as a triumph and an imaginary resurrection. Every rebirth dramatizes a different identity-personal, social, cultural or religious. In each case, she is the sufferer and victim of the oppressor termed as the enemy. But behind all these diverse identities, she is “the same, identical woman. “Thus it is this process of commingling into Death which serves as the inspiration of Plath’s body of work. To emphasize the theme of rebirth Plath uses the Biblical story of Lazarus rising from the clutches of death and the “ peanut crunching crowd enjoying a sadistic pleasure as if watching” a stripteaser” However, she warns the audience,” Herr Enemy” that” they will have to pay a price for the show they are enjoying at her expense:

“There is a charge / For the eyeing of my scars, there is a charge”. If Dying is her art then it is this process of controlling her art which she struggles with and which ultimately will determine the liberation of her soul or Moksha. However the

impediment lies in the Nazi Herr Doktor and his experiments to bring back her again into half life which resembles in her mind” the actual atrocities of Jewish Holocaust” and this use of Holocaust imagery metaphorically calls for the controller-controlled relationship. She calls her doctor or life-saver as “Herr Enemy” because he is preventing the subject from achieving her identity “by taking samples of her “ a touch”, “ a bit of blood” , “ A piece of my hair or my clothes” . She finally becomes his “Opus” his “pure gold baby”. “But the cry of her self that is reborn “melts to a shriek” as she becomes aware of the world she is born into. She identifies herself to a Jew who has been burnt to death. But even then she is not spared as her tormentors sift through her ash to obtain something. But she warns her oppressors, including God and the Devil that she will return to take revenge: “Herr God, Herr Lucifer/ Beware Beware. “Out of the ash /I rise with my red hair /And I eat men like air.” On the personal front it is known from her biographer that at this time she got separated from her husband “who turned out as Devil” by betraying her. So in this poem she seeks an imaginary consolation in her collapse giving the view that her “Lady Lazarus” is or her rebirth “serves as a wish fulfilment as well as an escape from Death “Her poetry is shaped artfully, “setting stark and elevated imagery of the sea, fire, moon, whiteness and silence – all suggestive of the purifying, peaceful nature of oblivion – against figures of domesticity and violence – the pleasures and the pains of living in the world.” Everything is included within a habit of intense personal meditation, conversation with the self: ‘I’ve got to . . . speak them to myself,’ Plath said of these later poems; ‘Whatever lucidity they may have comes from the fact that I say them aloud”.

“Daddy,” comprising sixteen five-line stanzas, is a brutal and venomous poem commonly understood to be about Plath’s deceased father, Otto Plath. The speaker begins by saying that he “does not do anymore,” and that she feels like she has been

a foot living in a black shoe for thirty years, too timid to either breathe or sneeze. She insists that she needed to kill him (she refers to him as “Daddy”), but that he died before she had time. She describes him as heavy, like a “bag full of God,” resembling a statue with one big gray toe and its head submerged in the Atlantic Ocean. She remembers how she at one time prayed for his return from death, and gives a German utterance of grief (which translates literally to “Oh, you”). She knows he comes from a Polish town that was overrun by “wars, wars, wars,” but one of her Polack friends has told her that there are several towns of that name. Therefore, she cannot uncover his hometown, where he put his “foot” and “root.” She also discusses how she could never find a way to talk to him. Even before she could speak, she thought every German was him, and found the German language “obscene.” In fact, she felt so distinct from him that she believed herself a Jew being removed to a concentration camp. She started to talk like a Jew and to feel like a Jew in several different ways. She wonders in fact, whether she might actually be a Jew, because of her similarity to a gypsy. To further emphasize her fear and distance, she describes him as the Luftwaffe, with a neat mustache and a bright blue Aryan eye. She calls him a “Panzer-man,” and says he is less like God than like the black swastika through which nothing can pass. In her mind, “Every woman adores a Fascist,” and the “boot in the face” that comes with such a man. When she remembers Daddy, she thinks of him standing at the blackboard, with a cleft chin instead of a cleft foot. However, this transposition does not make him a devil. Instead, he is like the black man who “Bit [her] pretty red heart in two.” He died when she was ten, and she tried to join him in death when she was twenty. When that attempt failed, she was glued back together. At this point, she realized her course – she made a model of Daddy and gave him both a “Meinkampf look” and “a love of the rack and the screw.” She promises him that she is “finally through;” the

telephone has been taken off the hook, and the voices can no longer get through to her. She considers that if she has killed one man, then she has in fact killed two. Comparing him to a vampire, she remembers how he drank her blood for a year, but then realizes the duration was closer to seven years. She tells him he can lie back now. There is a stake in his heart, and the villagers who despised him now celebrate his death by dancing on his corpse. She concludes by announcing, “Daddy, Daddy, you bastard, I’m through. “Though the final lines have a triumphant tone, it is unclear whether she means she has gotten “through” to him in terms of communication, or whether she is “through” thinking about him. Plath explained the poem briefly in a BBC interview:

“The poem is spoken by a girl with an Electra complex. The 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 paralyze each other –she has to act out the awful little allegory once over before she is free of it. In other words, contradiction is at the heart of the poem’s meaning. Neither its triumph nor its horror is to be taken as the sum total of her intention. Instead, each element is contradicted by its opposite, which explains how it shoulders so many distinct interpretations. This sense of contradiction is also apparent in the poem’s rhyme scheme and organization. It uses a sort of nursery rhyme, singsong way of speaking. There are hard sounds, short lines, and repeated rhymes (as in “Jew,” “through,” “do,” and “you”). This establishes and reinforces her status as a childish figure in relation to her authoritative father. This relationship is also clear in the name she uses for him – “Daddy”- and in her use of “oo” sounds and a childish cadence. However, this childish rhythm also has an ironic, sinister feel, since the chant-like, primitive quality can feel almost like a curse. One critic wrote that the poem’s “simplistic, insistent rhythm is one form of control, the

obsessive rhyming and repeated short phrases are others, means by which she attempts to charm and hold off evil spirits.” In other words, the childish aspects have a crucial, protective quality, rather than an innocent one. “Daddy” can also be viewed as a poem about the individual trapped between herself and society. Plath weaves together patriarchal figures – a father, Nazis, a vampire, a husband – and then holds them all accountable for history’s horrors. Like “The Colossus,” “Daddy” imagines a larger-than-life patriarchal figure, but here the figure has a distinctly social, political aspect. Even the vampire is discussed in terms of its tyrannical sway over a village. In this interpretation, the speaker comes to understand that she must kill the father figure in order to break free of the limitations that it places upon her. In particular, these limitations can be understood as patriarchal forces that enforce a strict gender structure. It has the feel of an exorcism, an act of purification. And yet the journey is not easy. She realizes what she has to do, but it requires a sort of hysteria. In order to succeed, she must have complete control, since she fears she will be destroyed unless she totally annihilates her antagonist.

The question about the poem’s confessional, autobiographical content is also worth exploring. The poem does not exactly conform to Plath’s biography, and her above-cited explanation suggests it is a carefully-constructed fiction. And yet its ambivalence towards male figures does correspond to the time of its composition – she wrote it soon after learning that her husband Ted Hughes had left her for another woman. Further, the mention of a suicide attempt links the poem to her life. However, some critics have suggested that the poem is actually an allegorical representation of her fears of creative paralysis, and her attempt to slough off the “male muse.” Stephen Gould Axelrod writes that “at a basic level, ‘Daddy’ concerns its own violent, transgressive birth as a text, its origin in a culture that regards it as illegitimate –a judgment

the speaker hurls back on the patriarch himself when she labels him a bastard.” The father is perceived as an object and as a mythical figure (many of them, in fact), and never really attains any real human dimensions. It is less a person than a stifling force that puts its boot in her face to silence her. From this perspective, the poem is inspired less by Hughes or Otto than by agony over creative limitations in a male literary world. However, even this interpretation begs something of an autobiographical interpretation, since both Hughes and her father were representations of that world. Plath’s usage of Holocaust imagery has inspired a plethora of critical attention. She was not Jewish but was in fact German, yet was obsessed with Jewish history and culture. Several of her poems utilize Holocaust themes and imagery, but this one features the most striking and disturbing ones. She imagines herself being taken on a train to “Dachau, Auschwitz, Belsen,” and starting to talk like a Jew and feel like a Jew. She refers to her father as a “panzer-man,” and notes his Aryan looks and his “Luftwaffe” brutality. One of the leading articles on this topic, written by Al Strangeways, concludes that Plath was using her poetry to understand the connection between history and myth, and to stress the voyeurism that is an implicit part of remembering. Plath had studied the Holocaust in an academic context, and felt a connection to it; she also felt like a victim, and wanted to combine the personal and public in her work to cut through the stagnant double-talk of Cold War America. She certainly uses Holocaust imagery, but does so alongside other violent myths and history, including those of Electra, vampirism, and voodoo. Strangeways writes that “the Holocaust assumed a mythic dimension because of its extremity and the difficulty of understanding it in human terms, due to the mechanical efficiency with which it was carried out, and the inconceivably large number of victims.” In other words, its shocking content is not an accident, but is rather an attempt to consider how the

20th century's great atrocity reflects and escalates a certain human quality.

Indeed, it is hard to imagine that any of Sylvia Plath's poems could leave the reader unmoved. "Daddy" is evidence of her profound talent, part of which rested in her unabashed confrontation with her personal history and the traumas of the age in which she lived. That she could write a poem that encompasses both the personal and historical is clear in "Daddy."

The movement continued with Berryman and Sexton:

Berryman's nonconformist fiction in his Confessional anti epic "The Dream Songs" about a commonplace American named Henry, undercuts the gravitas of Romantic and modernist poetry, as in "Dream Song I" -

*"Huffy Henry hid the day,
Unappeasable Henry sulked.
I see his point,—a trying to put things over.
It was the thought that they thought
They could do it made Henry wicked & away.*

But he should have come out and talked. "His Dream Songs are the rambling thoughts of a certain Henry who is a device that provides an aesthetic distance between the poet and the experience he writes of. In the guise of Henry, Berryman feels free to speak of experiences that would otherwise be hard to recount in the first person."

Anne Sexton, like Sylvia Plath was a Confessional poet who battled depression and wrote unusually tender poems about parents and their infants, including her own daughter, such as "Little Girl, My String Bean, My lovely Woman" and many

others. She also wrote strong political poems such as “After Auschwitz”-

“ Anger

As black as a hook

Overtakes me

And Death looks on a casual eye

And picks at the dirt under his fingernails.”

Yet, her troubled mind breaks through in a poem like “ Anna who was Mad”-

Did I make you go insane?

Did I tell you to climb out the window?

Forgive.Forgive.

Say not I did.

Say not.

Say.”

In an analysis of Sexton within the genre of confessional poetry, Dr. Ruwayda Jassim Muhammad offers these observations:

“The events of Sexton’s life are revealed in her poems — her breakdown, time in a mental hospital, her therapy, her troubled marriage (ending in divorce, her affairs, and her

relationship with her two daughters became transparently the stuff of her poetry, and her verse became far more direct than that of Robert Lowell or Sylvia Plath as confessional poetry.”

However the matrix of this essay lies in analyzing how far such Confessional outbursts of experiences in the textual tissue can be taken up as authentic- Were these poets merely engaged in the self aggrandizing narcissism of “I” and critiquing such egotistical whining “In 1981, New Formalist poet R.S. Gwynn published *The Narcissiad*, which literary critic Robert McPhillips later dubbed, “a Popean mock epic lambasting contemporary poets”. In *The Narcissiad*, Gwynn parodied both the clichés and excesses of Confessional poetry in the following words:

*“Our Younger Poet, weaned early from his bottle,
Begins to cast about for a role-model
And lacking knowledge of the great tradition,
Pulls from the bookstore shelf a slim edition
Of Poems of Now, and takes the offered bait,
And thus becomes the next initiate.
If male he takes his starting point from Lowell
And fearlessly parades his suffering soul
Through therapy, shock-treatments, and divorce
Until he whips the skin from a dead horse.
His female counterpart descends from Plath
And wanders down a self-destructive path
Laying the blame on Daddy while she guides
Her readers to their template suicides –*

*Forgetting in her addled state, alas
Her all-electric oven has no gas.”*

Conclusion

However, my personal opinion is that battered by the climactic turmoil of their inner wasteland they sought to resort to safeguard their existence in the therapeutic or cathartic realm of their words and eventually transcended their heap of sorrows into the blaze of spiritual truth of the Atma. And herein comes the universal appeal of such poetry thus Instead of wearing the readers with self moaning of “I” these poets metamorphosed their extremely personal anguish into larger, historical, universal suffering of mankind giving birth to the view that” poets of the sixties has a wide appeal for several reasons. “Starting from Robert Lowell to Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath and John Berryman their consciousness was imbued in a heightened sensitiveness which bloomed their creative genuins as is reflected in most of the artists and thus in these extremely fragile and intense world of their psyche existed the morbid light of life and death simultaneously, the emotional truth of which they captured and meshed in their literary gamut. The authentic value of such truths may appear as exaggerated falsity to the naked eye of an ordinary reader but to borrow Picasso’s words if whatever we can imagine is true then all art is true in the sense of their imaginative validity and thus to a competent and a conscious reader the Confessional voices are as true as scientific laws, as they are merely the colossal manifestations of our inner chatter which these poets very minutely weaved in the nets of metaphors and imagery.

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