

(16) Confessional Poetry

Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, Theodore Roethke, John Berryman

Confessional Poetry

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| Origins & History | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the most influential movement in poetry after the Second World War, prominent in the late 1950s and beyond • the term was first used by M. L. Rosenthal in his review of Robert Lowell's (1917–1977) <i>Life Studies</i> (1959) • confessional approaches are represented in history for instance by Sappho, St Augustine, William Wordsworth • Walt Whitman (1819–1892) used a first-person speaker, though as a poetic persona rather than his own person • Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803–1882) predicted and defined confessional poetry in his essay 'The Poet' (1844) |
| Shared Features | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the confessional poets are not associated with any central leading figure or any formally declared manifesto • share their preoccupation with their personal lives, especially under the stressing circumstances of a life crisis • describe their own private suffering to make it universally shared, often drawing a parallel to a crisis of nation • give an autobiographical impression, which it often is, but also often render fiction as if it were autobiography • focus on developing the content rather than elaborating the form of a poem, prefer open forms and free verse |
| Subjects & Methods | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • write highly subjective poetry, offer an expression of personality rather than an eliotic impersonal withdrawal • regard poetry writing as an act of purifying self-therapy, focus on sick, imbalanced and suffering protagonists • favour narrative poetry, employ irony and understatement to gain detachment of the author from the subject • abolish taboos and obstacles between the poet and the audience, discuss freely suicide, alcoholism, perversion • tend to express defiance of the establishment, present isolated protagonists often suffering from estrangement |
| Representatives | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • represented by Randall Jarrell (1914–1965), John Berryman (1914–1972), Elizabeth Bishop (1911–1979) • many confessional poets were subjected to depressive illness and many of them committed suicide, including Sylvia Plath (oven gas poisoning), Anne Sexton (car gas poisoning) and John Berryman (jumping off a bridge) |

Sylvia Plath (1932–1963)

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| Relation of Life & Art | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • married the British poet Ted Hughes (1930–1998), had two children and was left by him for another woman • attempted suicide several times, eventually killed herself within a year after the separation from her husband • concerned with pain generating an impulse towards oblivion, compels the reader to participate in her despair • rendered her private suffering in inimitably brutal ways, both daringly and deliberately, but with poetic craft • explained that she drew on her experience but sought to manipulate it with an informed and intelligent mind • proved her capability to fabricate a larger historical meaning and an imaginative myth out of personal horror • organized her ultimate personal confessions into highly disciplined, intricate, meaningful art, with references operating within a wide symbolic framework including the war, history, politics, her family or Christian myths |
| Poetry Features | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • draws on honoured literary traditions, including the Puritan habit of meditation upon last things, the American compulsion to confront the abyss of the self and the conviction that imagining death is the definite experience • shapes her poetry around stark and elevated imagery of the sea, fire, moon, whiteness and silence, suggesting the purifying nature of oblivion, against figures of domesticity and violence, associated with the pains of living • shows wry tenderness and wonder in poems on the affections tying us to this world, as 'Morning Song' on the birth of her daughter, or corrosive wit in poems on the false self constructed by the world, as 'The Applicant' • employs a rapt and bardic tone singed by the fire of prophecy in poems concentrating on the ambiguous nature of death, as 'Death & Co.', or poems on perfecting the self in the experience of dying, as 'Fever 103' or 'Edge' |
| Poetry Collection | <p><i>The Colossus</i> (1960)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the only poetry collection to be published during her lifetime, notable for its characteristic controlled intensity, precise imagery, fresh metaphors and the haunted tone of an outwardly successful but privately suffering woman |
| Novel of Confession | <p><i>The Bell Jar</i> (1963)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • her only novel, a semi-autobiographical writing published originally under the pseudonym of Victoria Lucas |
| Poetry Masterpiece | <p><i>Ariel</i>¹ (1965)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • a posthumous collection of her latest poems, record her unbearable suffering and awareness of an early death • the poems were written in the last year of her life, collected and edited by her husband and literary executor |
| Horse Riding | <p>'Ariel'</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the title poem describes seemingly a simple morning ride on the horse of the name that the author owned while she lived in England, but her heightened consciousness turns the most peaceful imagery into pictures of violence |

¹ 'Ariel' is Hebrew for the 'lion of God', an authority over the Earth and its Elements, an angel of healing, wrath and creation; or, the name of the author's horse; or, the airy spirit in Shakespeare's *The Tempest* which helps its master Prospero control fire and air.

Elm Tree
Speaking**‘Elm’**

- the poem employs images of country life turned **antipastoral**, spoken by an elm tree obsessed with destruction

Hospital
Ward Stay**‘Tulips’**

- the poem originated in a personal experience when the poet was taken into hospital following her miscarriage
- projects the surroundings into her thoughts, beginning with the hospital ward and continuing with the flowers
- describes the feelings of peace and release evoked by the whiteness, snow-like purity and light of the hospital in near sacramental terms, turns this experience into a mysterious initiation, into a **dying away from the world**
- surrenders her identity that imprisons her in existence, sinks into a condition of utter emptiness associated with immersion in water, suggesting a return to the foetal state and the matrix of being, gives up her body and her life
- feels disturbed by the picture of her husband and children with ‘little smiling hooks’ to fish her out of the sea
- perceives the gift of red tulips as a threat to her peace, associates them with noise and pressure that draw her back to life and to her responsibilities as wife and mother, feels watched by the tulips, committed to a role in life
- juxtaposes images of imprisonment and escape, the red blood of life and the white salt sea of death at the end

Jew v. Nazi
Relation**‘Daddy’**

- the poem is purportedly ‘spoken by a girl with an Electra complex’, based on the author’s own ambivalent relationship with her father and her tendency to recreate aspects of that relationship in later adult relationships
- the speaker is a thirty-year-old woman coping with communication problems with her late authoritative father, transforms private suffering into a public drama by thinking herself into being Jew and her father a Nazi officer
- the author appropriates the facts of her life into a poetic litany of love and hate, the facts being the death of her father when she was still a young girl and her suicide attempt, the fiction being the persona of a Nazi victim
- builds a tension in the narrator’s attitude to her father and other men, between fear and desire, resentment and tenderness, **detestation and adoration of the victim for the victimizer**, distaste and attraction to the life drama
- renders the horrors of personal and general history in terms of fairytale and folk story, invokes nursery rhymes, employs a manic gaiety in tone which is at odds with the bleak content and produces a curiously hypnotic effect

Art of
Dying**‘Lady Lazarus’**

- the poem is spoken by ‘a woman who has the great and terrible gift of being reborn’, only she has to die first
- the speaker figures as ‘the phoenix, the libertarian spirit’ and ‘also just a good, plain, very resourceful woman’
- evokes the mythical cycle of **death and rebirth**, claims dying to be an art which she does ‘exceptionally well’

Anne Sexton (1928–1974)Life & Art
Inspiration

- attended like Sylvia Plath creative writing courses led by Robert Lowell at Boston University, Massachusetts
- started writing on the advice of a therapist when she was treated for clinical depression and suicidal thoughts
- founded an informal poetry group including poets George Starbuck (1931–1996) or Maxine Kumin (b. 1925)
- collaborated with Maxine Kumin, the Jewish American feminist poet and writer, on several children’s books
- drew inspiration for her topics from her **psychiatric ward stays**, as reflected in the title of her first collection
- admitted that she employed **invention** in her poetry, which is confessional but not necessarily autobiographical

Poetry
Features

- employs an intensely personal stance, even poems seemingly not about herself usually turn out to be subjective
- uses a painfully raw open tone which is given a further edge by elaborate **rhyme scheme** or tight **stanza form**
- juxtaposes painful emotions in contrast to a conservative emphasis on rhyme, alliteration and a detached tone
- pioneered formerly **taboo topics**, for instance suicide, depression, masturbation, sexual perversion and others
- focuses on the pain of being daughter, wife, mother and lover, also sings ‘in celebration of the woman’ she is
- writes often in **praise of her distinctive identity**, not just as an American poet, but an American female poet

First
Collection***To Bedlam and Part Way Back* (1960)**

- her first collection won her immediate attention for its honest portrayal of a nervous breakdown and recovery
- includes intensely personal and relentlessly honest self-revelatory poetry in both sardonic and vulnerable tone

Witch
Kind**‘Her Kind’**

- the poem expresses through its speaker the feelings that nobody understands her, compares herself to a witch

Second
Collection***All My Pretty Ones* (1962)**

- the collection further develops the confessional mode, interrelates the poems by recurrent themes and symbols
- the title poem is addressed to the author’s father, exacerbates the intense mixture of love and hatred to her father by contrasting the passion and intimacy of the address with the strictness of the given measure of the form

Parents’
Deaths**‘The Truth the Dead Know’**

- the poem tries to come to terms with the deaths of the author’s parents that followed closely one upon another

- Pulitzer Collection • ***Live or Die*** (1966)
 • the collection explores topics like suicide, crucifixion or the death of others, won her the Pulitzer Prize (1967)
- Fairytale Retelling • ***Transformations*** (1971)
 • an original recreation of several traditional fairy tales and the related myths of the female and male principles

Theodore Roethke (1908–1963)

- Life & Art Influences • spent his boyhood years on the twenty-five acres of greenhouses jointly owned by his father who was a florist
 • influenced the **horticultural imagery** and the perceptive scrutiny of nature which emerge throughout his work
 • grew up in the Midwest, which is reflected in his concern with the frontiers of existence, the sources of being
 • qualifies as a poet of nature, though not in the traditional sense, as a poet of the unconscious and a dream poet
 • produced poetry in **strict forms** in **rational** modes of thought and poetry in **free verse** in **surrealistic** modes
 • began as a formalist poet, made use of traditional verse structures and the then fashionable intellectual modes
 • preoccupied with the evolution and identity of the self, his later poetry gets however more mystical and vaguer
- Exposing One's Self • ***Open House*** (1941)
 • the title poem of his first collection declares the author's intention of using **himself as the material** of his art
 • produces tight and epigrammatic verses employing stripped and bare language, driving and insistent rhythms
- Exploring One's Roots • ***The Lost Son and Other Poems*** (1948)
 • his second collection **returns to his boyhood** and starts a search for the subrational prehistorical roots of being
 • compares the birth and growth of consciousness to the birth and growth of plants, trees and all organic matter
 • roots the poems in sensuous experience, in the 'greenhouse' world or natural landscape of the poet's childhood
 • begins with a primitive journey into the interior of the natural order and into himself as part of that order, uses a more primitive voice resembling prose so as to comply to his concern 'with more primitive effects in poetry'
 • uses a long free-verse line, elaborately alliterated and with heavy stresses to suggest an evolutionary struggle
 • seeks not to impose order on conscious or subconscious experience but rather to discover the order latent in it
 • gravitates towards a more subliminal language, the intuitions of folklore, fairytale, myth and shared archetypes
 • the title poem juxtaposes original free verse lines and petrified forms of children's sayings, puzzles or songs
- Child's Confession • **'Child on Top of a Greenhouse'**
 • the poem introduces the original subject matter of a confession given from the limited point of view of a child
- Collective Memory • ***Praise to the End!*** (1951)
 • his third collection travels beyond childhood and the natural world for the unknown territory of racial memory
 • journeys backward into **unindividuated experience** that then becomes part of an evolutionary process forward
- Primeval Journey • **'Unfold! Unfold!'**
 • the poem is modelled on the archetypal pattern when the heroic protagonist travels into a nightworld, conquers the dangers he meets and returns to lead a fuller and more inclusive life in the daylight of ordinary existence
 • compresses language and syntax into abrupt dreamlike units to mark the crossing of individual consciousness
 • gives voice to the inhabitants of the collective unconscious in the form of a 'whelm of proverbs', muttering of a rudimentary sensibility which is a speech as primitive as folk-saying and almost as subhuman as an animal cry
 • attempts to recreate rather than simply report on the journey by using primeval imagery, symbols and rhythms
- Selected Poems • ***Words for the Wind*** (1958)
 • a representative prize-winning collection of selected verse, including childhood poems, love poems and others
- Affirming Relations • **'Meditations of an Old Woman'** (1958), **'The Dying Man'** (1958)
 • the poems illustrate the author's intensified interest in the people around him as he is growing older himself
 • turns outward to affirm his relationship with others by adopting their voice and vision at least for a moment
 • the former poem features as the narrator an old woman, modelled partly on the author's mother, who considers the imminence of her death, the disappointments of her past but also positive moments, ending with affirmation
- Mixing Modes • ***The Far Field*** (1964)
 • the collection intermixes the confessional, the metaphysical, the transcendental, the mystical and the visionary
 • the title poem traces a literal and transcendental journey of the self through both cultivated and wild landscape

John Berryman (1914–1972)

- Writing Developments • his father committed suicide when he was twelve, himself experienced depression and alcoholism, took his life
 • started writing short poems of cerebral quality in a direct style, influenced by W. H. Auden (1907–1973) and William Butler Yeats (1865–1939), who saved him from the crushing influence of Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot

- turned to the confessional mode as the formal style of his mentors did not comply with his nervous sensibility
- preoccupied with portraying dream-like states haunted by **self-tormenting** thoughts and fantasies of suicide

Early
Poetry

The Dispossessed (1948)

- the collection includes his famous ‘The Ball Poem’ on the symbolic encounter of a little boy with his first loss

Dramatic
Poetry

Homage to Mistress Bradstreet and Other Poems (1956)

- a long poetic sequence in the dramatic mode, sustained by an eight-line stanza and the persona of Bradstreet
- the Puritan poetess serves as the mistress, across the centuries, of the contemporary poet and as his alter ego
- the author’s voice merges freely into the voice of the protagonist, engages her in dialogue, identifies with her
- his participation in the life of the Puritan woman becomes a means of his imaginative **discovery of America**
- pays homage to the extraordinary woman and her strength which made her the first poet published in America

Confession-
al Poetry

77 *Dream Songs* (1964); ***His Toy, His Dream, His Rest*** (1968); ***Dream Songs*** (1969)

- the first and the second mentioned contain altogether 385 dream songs, the last volume collects them all in one
- each of the songs is arranged in three six-line stanzas and features as the imaginary central character Henry Pussycat, ‘a white American in early middle age, sometimes in blackface, who has suffered an irreversible loss’
- the protagonist variously talks to himself sometimes in the first person, sometimes in the third, sometimes even in the second, and has a friend who is never named but addresses himself as Mr Bones and variants thereof
- the confessions are turned into a **vaudeville performance** which does not lack relieving moments of humour

Personae

Features

- the poems are peculiarly personal, idiosyncratic, even confusing, but relevant comments on the modern man
- the fragmented syntax of the poems reflects the nervous hesitations and cries of a mentally imbalanced speaker
- the tone oscillates between realism and phantasmagoria, between biting **irony** and **self-pitying** melancholy
- the language varies from archaisms, colloquial speech, street slang and black dialect to word play and puns
- recurrent motifs include the feelings of irreplaceable and incomprehensible loss on the death of loved ones, the pain and suffering as attributes of humanity or confronting crises by the means of psychoanalysis and writing