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SYLVIA PLATH AND THE "I" OF THE CONFESSIONAL MODE

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Abstract: *The confessional mode has been a way of expressing the deepest feelings of love, anger, rage, loneliness and happiness throughout poetry. The present paper aims at presenting the core of confessional writing, the uniqueness of the poetic mode that made Sylvia Plath famous. The social context, the biography, the reading are important elements presented in this paper that contributed to the writing of the poetry. All these made that cry of the "I" so loud and well-heard.*

Key words: confession, I, biography.

Sylvia Plath is one of the most acclaimed poets because of the lack of restrictions she uses in poetry writing. For the poet, the real feelings, thoughts, the most intimate facts belonging to her life are part of her creation. What can a poet write more truthfully and clearly about if not the life that one knows so well? This is the reason why we open our essay with the most important word ever used by the confessional poet Sylvia Plath "I".

What is the role of using "I" in poetry, what is its importance? Safo, Rilke, Baudelaire or Whitman, Thomas Wyatt, Pope or Byron wrote poetry using the first person, creating subjective poems and setting themselves apart from Eliot's theories that emphasised the presence of the mask and the unveiling of the true thoughts of the poet.

Unlike their predecessors who found inappropriate the usage of certain words, themes or situations in their poetry, the new confessional poets use cutting edge subjects such as mental and physical illness, domestic breakdown, sexual satisfaction or frustration, and functions of the female body (menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth, miscarriage or abortion) in order to create a new poetry fitted to the 20th century and to the modern man who sets in the centre of their existence the "I", the self, whose axis mundi is needed to be found inside. The quest is to be done within oneself and not in the outside world.

Confessional poets, first of all, bring into the poem the presence of the self as a unique poetic symbol. They are artists whose whole mythology is the lost self, states Robert Phillips who emphasises in his writings the core of the confessional writing. As it is, the "I" is, ultimately, the starting point for all the important elements that lead to the confessional mode. (Phillips, 8)

"I was ten when they buried you./ At twenty I tried to die/ And get back, back, back to you./ I thought even the bones would do." (Plath, 222) says Sylvia Plath in one of the most well know poems,

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Daddy, where she presents her deepest thoughts and strong emotions related to her short and early cut off relationship with her father.

Besides, the use of "I", and that of the "you" is also a strong choice because these two pronouns weight the heavy load of witness deposition, the reader is the one to whom the poet confesses. The reader's participation is bringing forward a personal conversation and is at the same time offering to the receptacle the quality of wanted or unwanted guest, whose eavesdropping or accepted presence reflects the real and truthful conversation between the two participants.

Take as example the below quote from *The Tour* where the imagined conversation between the aunt and the inhabitant makes the poem dynamic and offers the reader Plath's own thoughts at the sight of her aunt, with the ironies, the gap between the poet's attitude and her thoughts, the obedience in fact and the revolt in the back of the mind, determining the reader to be part of the secret thought.

"O maiden aunt, you have come to call./ Do step into the hall!/ With your bold/ Gecko, the little flick!/ All cogs, weird sparkle and every cog solid gold./ And I in slippers and housedress with no lipstick!" (Plath, 237)

The confessionals turn against what hides the poet – Berryman, Roethke, Sexton, Snodgrass or Lowell – all of them proved that it was time for the poetry to make a step back and one forward to take what is useful from the Romantics and also, from their modern predecessors, Dickinson, and Whitman and to bring it all to a new level of offering the self to the reader.

Sylvia Plath, taking part in one of Lowell's creative writing classes enhances fully his new ideas about writing poetry and begins to create an intimate poetry that brought her so much success. Her empathy with the reader is reflected into the new post-war reality.

In *History of Private Life*, P. Aries and G. Duby discuss the evolution of personal feelings, the exacerbated sensitivity that rises in the modern man. They state that beginning with 1894 the number of suicides begins to rise. The statistics' analysis confirms the importance of individual isolation and, at the same time, of all the processes of anthropological nature which favour this type of behaviour. Very clearly it is set that in the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century the big number of suicides are those of celibates, widows and divorcees. (Aries, 228)

In our opinion, this statistics reflects greatly the background the modern man is set in. Sylvia Plath echoes through her biography the state in which people that are alone and have somehow lost the dear one can empathise with Plath's biography.

The "I" incorporates so much of the intimacy of the writer that, it is somehow impossible to discuss confessional poetry without linking it to biography. For Sylvia Plath, some important sequences of her life were, for some critics, important in deciphering the poetry.

Still, a line should be drawn regarding the influence of biography into the poet's work, and to that matter I will present our opinion in the following lines.

Confession is based on biography. Everything that happens in someone's life is set into confession sooner or later.

After all, there is no good or bad in confession that cannot be understood. Crucial in the fulfilment of the goal the poet sets for her writing is the belief that someone can understand the turmoil inside her soul. As it is, the experience is not validated because there is no confession until someone hears it. The great danger is that of the gullible reader who can easily consider true what the poet writes. "O mud, mud, how fluid! —/ Thick as foreign

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coffee, and with a sluggy pulse**./** Speak, speak! Who is it?/ It is the bowel-pulse, lover of digestibles./ It is he who has achieved these syllables." (Plath, 202). This is a great example of biographical poem. The story says that Plath heard a woman on the phone speaking with her husband, a woman who she thought it to be his mistress.

This biographical story sets the poem into a new dimension, that of the truth, the reality we are all living in, not fictional, not idealised, not coloured differently and this particular setting loads the meaning of the poem. The poet presents her life as it is, and that particular scene is supported by her biographers who emphasised it quite enough and, ultimately, this is what makes the confessional poem unique, that particular awareness of the thought that what was said belongs to the reality.

To support our ideas I bring forward the word of the confessional poets, W. D. Snodgrass, in relation to therapeutic poetry. The confessional poetry was seen by Robert Phillips, one of the theoreticians of the confessional mode as the "poetry therapy" (Phillips, 2), observing the easiness in writing of the subjects of all their traumatic experience that determined their current state.

Snodgrass admits that through therapy he succeeded in writing poetry related to what interested him. First of all, it was the loss of his daughter after the divorce, followed by his own anguishes and unhappy thoughts. But all in all these do not mean, states the poet situating himself on the same page with Anne Sexton, that the poetry should have a therapeutic role, but it must come from what is important for the poet. Anne Sexton, in an interview for the same *The Paris Review* says "my doctors tell me that I understand something in a poem that I haven't integrated into my life. In fact, I may be concealing it from myself, while I was revealing it to the readers. The poetry is often more advanced, in terms of my unconscious, than I am. Poetry, after all, milks the unconscious" (Sexton, para 6)

However, regardless of how much they bring into the poetry from their own life, the confessional poets set barriers between them and the direct expression of the self offering what they want to the reader and keeping to themselves what they don't feel is needed to be offered. But this is not the important issue, what is really special for the confessional mode is that what they share is cutting-edge, and is different from what the others have said. Furthermore, the confessional poetry reflects the personality of the poet more than any other poetical mode.

Sometimes, revealing your own life in front of the others is not an easy thing to do, especially when the readers, the society, the literary critics notice that you broke some social, literary and moral rules.

The poetry has the extraordinary quality of cleaning, of setting the creator thorough a purgatory state of their supposed sins. Still, we must remember that poetry creation is an egocentric act of self-therapy that does not involve the forgiveness of the sins by a superior instance but by the community of readers that can judge the author transferring individual confession into a public one.

Certainly, for the poets of confession, the public reward through the recognition of the quality of the poems is an essential part of the confessional process, validating the confession and justifying the act of it.

The easiness of confession comes also from the use of common words. The more elaborate the language the further the poetry from the up to the moment feelings, the dryness of the language determines the quality of confession. The confessional poets succeed in establishing a strong relationship with their readers and making them to empathize with their sufferings as if these belonged to them. That is one of

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the most extraordinary qualities of the confessional poetry, making your own thoughts and feeling everyone's.

The everyday words become poetry. They are handy for the poet to create with them and for the reader to easily understand. If we read chronologically Sylvia Plath's poems we cannot help but notice the evolution of the language from the complexity of the first poems to the simplicity of the lasts, succeeding through images and simplified vocabulary to send stronger feelings than those where the words are sought for so intensely. Let's take for example the poem Winter *Landscape, with Rooks* written in 1959 an example of dry language that is not very helpful at the first reading of the poem "Water in the millrace, through a sluice of stone/ plunges headlong into that black pond/ where, absurd and out-of-season, a single swan/ floats chaste as snow, taunting the clouded mind/ which hungers to haul the white reflection down." (Plath, 21).

Unlike the first example, a poem written in 1962, offers a different use of the language, that is *Elm* "It is the sea you hear in me/ Its dissatisfactions?/ Or the voice of nothing, that was your madness?// Love is a shadow/ How you lie and cry after it/ Listen: these are its hooves: it has gone off, like a horse." (Plath, 192)

The easiness of getting through the language barrier and the direct expression of the feelings and opinions without filtering them through the figures of styles, symbols or mythical images offers to this poem the lightness of attracting the reader and enabling the simple access to the interpretation of the text.

Public confession is not easy. Deciding to set yourself into the limelight with all you have and sharing with no regrets the deepest feeling of your mind through poetry is an act of courage.

As it is, confessional poets did that and they did it well and all that because they found the literary and more, the poetic characteristics that fitted them best and set them into the confessional mode, and Sylvia Plath is a representative of confessional poetry through public confession and an example of offering her life through poetry into public recognition.

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