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THE FIRST CONFESSIONAL POETS

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Abstract: *The present paper aims to present the beginnings of confessional poetry in literature and its evolution towards a new poetic mode that sets in its centre the most intimate thoughts of the poet and claims them to pertain to his self and more importantly, he/she thrust them to the reader. The confessional poetry needed a long time to become the poetry of Plath or Lowell. It took a long way to take the shape we are familiar with now. From the Romantics to the poets of the '60, the confessional tone in poetry has evolved towards the expression of the deepest feelings in the human soul. In the following lines I introduce the confessional poets and the main themes they use in their poetry.*

Key words: *confession, poetry, religion, I, modern.*

To better understand the emergence and the development of the confessional poetry we need a brief analysis of the paradigm of modern poetry and of the factors that contributed to the formation and development of the new poems.

Predominance of artificial over natural is the determining factor in shifting the interest on the main subject in favor of the elements of the modern world "In this charity ward, this poorhouse, where the dead/ Crowd foot to foot, head to head, no flower/ Breaks the soil" (Plath, 1981) announces Plath in *Metaphors*. In fact, humans' relationship with the world is changing to such an extent as to give rise to a new poetical mode. People no longer count on the relationship with the divinity that becomes unable to revive the world, to understand it and to provide solutions for saving it.

Thus, the myth loses its strength, its sacral function, and it becomes useless; actually, in modern times, it is reinvested at a personal level.

Each individual is one's own centre in the modern world. One communicates himself and only himself, producing a personal mythology, where the deity is him, but the important step forward is the restoration of the link with the world. The poet creates a work of art that needs to be listened, and this poem has to resonate in the mind of the reader. But how can it be obtained? First of all, it can be acquired by finding bridges of communication with readers. The modern poet succeeds in arousing in the receiver similar feelings with those he himself has encountered in real life or thorough poetry, the latter willingly entering the game of manipulation of this reality. (Musina, 2004)

In this context, confessional poetry works at immediate and unmediated connection attempts to the reader. What matters to the confessional poet is to

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establish a quick relationship with the reader who finds his own anxieties, fears, and the lack of identity and is seeking explanations for the loss of the center inside the poetry, because, now, this is the one that completes him and fills in the void of solitude. It also makes him aware of the presence in his ephemeral existence of a center which he recognizes to be fit to his reality.

Confessional poetry movement signified an important change to the way most American poets approached the creation at that time. The introduction of autobiographical elements in poetry, the decrease of the distance between the poet and the reader, the strong emotional tone and the narrative structure become new landmarks of a different kind of poetry, more relaxed and more colloquial than the one required by the New Criticism followers who focused only on the literature and the text and not on their relationship with the reader, for whom the poetry was actually intended. The new poetry of confession allows poets to express feelings, thoughts and emotions without repressing detailed descriptions of pain or traumatic experiences. (Beach, 2003)

From the literary historical perspective, most critics set the starting time of confessional poetry creation in the change suffered in by Robert Lowell's creative style in the late '70s. Lowell was accompanied by W. D. Snodgrass, Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton and of course by John Berryman. The confessional poetry has been embraced by more and more poets, marital problems and domestic life becoming favorite themes of creative writing workshops. Robert Phillips in his book dedicated to confessional poets says: "There have always been confessional poets. That is, there have always been confessional artists, some of whom happen to be poets. Even the cavemen, drawing on walls the images of animals they had to kill, were in their way confessional artists. If they drew the image of an animal truly enough they believed it would insure a successful slaying." (Phillips, 1973)

Confessional poetry has always existed, only that, once it receives the name because of Lowell and his followers, it is defined individuality. We speak of the romantic poetry of confession in particular, for the post-war generation poets. The poets of confession, despite their self-destructive feelings, created a poetry that vibrates with the English Romantic poetry. Their poetry is written in response to the overwhelming emotional impulses, which now, find no reason to be hidden from the reader's eye. They use direct sensorial stimuli and take the usual language of ordinary people learned from the imagist school of Pound. The deep intimacy of poetry requires such access. Confessional poetry is, perhaps, the most lyrical poetry from the Romantics onwards. (Altieri,2006)

Still, the poetry of confession was present into modern poetry „Wanderer moon smiling a/ faintly ironical smile/ at this/ brilliant, dew-moistened/ summer morning,—/ a detached/ sleepily indifferent/ smile, a/ wanderer's smile,—/ if I should/ buy a shirt/ your color and/ put on a necktie/ sky-blue/ where would they carry me?//" (Williams,1985) The playful poetry of William Carlos Williams' *Summer Song* is reminiscent of the favorite themes belonging to confessional poets, of situating in the center the poem that focuses on the impossibility of finding a place where to feel comfortable, of the "I", of sleeping which is synonymous with death and of the blue sky

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reminiscent of the sea, expressing the great desire of acquiring distance.

The tradition of the confessional poetry can find its origins in the poets who used intensively the mythology in their creation, such as Whitman and Yeats or Wordsworth and Byron, on their romantic self-examination and self-dramatization. That was, probably, the starting point of confessional poetry from what Keats called the egotistical sublime.[2]

How self became from Augustine on, the focus of all religious confessions, neither Wordsworth is the exception in mentioning himself and theorizing his presence in the work, stating in a letter dated May 1, 1805 that is without precedent in the history of literature for a man to talk so much about himself, (Gill,2003). However, this is how in the poem *The Prelude*, also called his autobiographical poem, Wordsworth confesses to the reader "I look about; and should the chosen guide/ Be nothing better than a wandering cloud,/ I cannot miss my way. I breathe again!/ Trances of thought and mountings of the mind/ Come fast upon me: it is shaken off,/ That burthen of my own unnatural self,/ The heavy weight of many a weary day/ Not mine, and such as were not made for me." (Wordsworth,2008). Wordsworth uses the same themes that confessional poets love: life, sadness, lack of adaptation, uncertainty, drawing the world described in detail by the poets of modernity.

Baudelaire in *Fleurs du mal* presents its own vision of the world, Baudelaire's quality of poems consisting, as those of the confessional poetry, in non-compliance with the rules of literary traditions, in the nature of the discussed topics and in the honest and true representation of life, society and human relationships. An example of the poetic direct confession is found in the poem *De Profundis Clamavi*. The night, the death and the anxiety of mind are the favorite themes of confessional poets we encounter in Baudelaire's work. And if, as it is happening with the generation we are talking about, biography sets the tone of the poem, the same happens with Baudelaire, who thought at a moment of his existence, that suicide is the only way out of the existential turmoil. „J'implore ta pitié, Toi, l'unique que j'aime,/ Du fond du gouffre obscur où mon cœur est tombé./ C'est un univers morne à l'horizon plombé,/ Où nagent dans la nuit l'horreur et le blasphème;/ Un soleil sans chaleur plane au-dessus six mois,/ Et les six autres mois la nuit couvre la terre;/ C'est un pays plus nu que la terre polaire/- Ni bêtes, ni ruisseaux, ni verdure, ni bois!" (Baudelaire, 2000) Baudelaire is the poet of the city *par excellence* for whom the city becomes the hell, the abyss, the generator of fears, the desert, and the prison he can not escape from. He is opening through the description of the city, a new window for the modern poetic background - all this landscape leading to strong reactions presented later in poetry. Hugo Friedrich's explanation lies in the structure of modern poetry with all these infernal images in the theory of "homo duplex" according to

[2] In a letter addressed by Keats to Richard Woodhouse in October 27 1818, Keats calls Wordsworth *egoist*. In here the poet comes back to the subject of poetic egoism in his famous distinction between the poetic character he himself assumes and the sublime egoism that he thinks belongs to Wordsworth „…I mean that sort of which, if I am anything, f I am a member; that sort distinguished from the wordsworthian or egotistical sublime; which is a thing per se and stands alone" (Strachan, 2003:17)

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which the poet, in order to feel the need to find the celestial pole has to find the satanic one first. So, Baudelaire's confession asks for redemption through his struggle with assertion but eventually, he knows he is doomed. Friedrich's explanation regarding Baudelaire's dualism is that he had the will to pray, to speak seriously about sin, was deeply touched by human guilt - so much he would have smiled to some contemporary psychiatrist's insight who explains his suffering as "repressed maternal complex". But he did not find a way. "Prayer is wearing in weakness, eventually ceasing to be a prayer. True, he offers his pain to his poetry, seeing in it the hallmark of human dignity and knowing the damnations that could suggest that in him survives a dispersed *jansenism*. [...] In the back of his own conscience of his damnation flickers the joy of tasting it with satisfaction." (Friedrich, 1981)

Unlike Baudelaire, confessional poets are not interested in their Christian salvation. Snodgrass declares himself to be an atheist. He doesn't define the term *confession* integrating in it the explanation of its ritualistic value. Sexton, similarly to Baudelaire, tries to get closer to the divinity but fails in this mission.

Walt Whitman, an eternal poet of confession was probably the first poet of direct, intimate, without restriction confession. Certainly, if Robert Lowell is the father of confessional poetry, we can call Walt Whitman the grandfather, that is what, Robert Phillips, one of the first theorists of confessional poetry states. (Phillips, 1973) I exemplify through one of the most famous poems that Whitman wrote *Song of Myself* "I Celebrate myself, and sing myself,/And what I assume you shall assume, /For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.//I loafe and invite my soul,/ I lean and loafe at my ease observing a spear of summer grass./ My tongue, every atom of my blood, form'd from this soil,/ this air,/ Born here of parents born here from parents the same, and/ their parents the same,/ I, now thirty-seven years old in perfect health begin,/ Hoping to cease not till death.//" (Whitman, 2001) The interest for himself, for what he feels and thinks, without outside intervention, without an alter ego, without a mask, revealing himself to the reader as he is, brings Whitman so close to the '60s poets. At a first, superficial reading, Whitman's poetry of observation is possible using the same tone, the same concepts, and the awareness of existence in the same way. If Whitman is placed in the center of the world, celebrating himself and thorough that all the others, seeking a positive attitude towards life, Yeats, in his turn, celebrates his love and, at the same time, lines up with confessional poets who wrote poems dedicated to the war.

Thinking about Yeats as another poet of direct confession, of the most intimate thoughts and feelings, and his rebellion that resembles the romantic grand gestures, I must consider him a precursor of the confessional poetry. I do not want to miss mentioning the famous *When you are old*, poem that describes the evolution of feelings through direct declarations addressed to the beloved one "When you are old and grey and full of sleep,/ And nodding by the fire, take down this book,/ And slowly read, and dream of the soft look/ Your eyes had once, and of their shadows deep;// How many loved your moments of glad grace,/ And loved your beauty with love false or true,/ But one man loved the pilgrim Soul in you,/ And loved the sorrows of your changing

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face;// And bending down beside the glowing bars,/ Murmur, a little sadly, how Love fled/ And paced upon the mountains overhead/ And hid his face amid a crowd of stars.//" (*The Norton Anthology of Poetry*, 1970) Furthermore, Yeats manages to establish the contact with the reader through the tone of confession used especially in the poem called *Parnell's Funeral.* Without any analysis towards the purpose of writing, as we all know, Yeats' feelings towards Britain and Ireland, one last observation is to be made related to the confessional poetry precursors' interest in reader's empathy and that is shown in the poem dedicated to the national hero. „The rest I pass, one sentence I unsay./ Had de Valera eaten Parnell's heart/ No loose-lipped demagogue had won the day. / No civil rancour torn the land apart. // Had Cosgrave eaten Parnell's heart, the land's/ Imagination had been satisfied,/ Or lacking that, government in such hands./ O'Higgins its sole statesman had not died.//" (Yeats, 1996)

It is very important to make a short note at this point. Poetry is not a whimper prosaic confession. If the subject is not traditional, the creative methods remain the same and they become even indispensable in writing on any subject. It is a very great courage that the confessional poets take, to publicly express their suffering and not in intimacy as is customary at the beginning and in the middle of the 19th century. Confession is an act of ownership of the pain and burdens rather than of joys and happy moments. (Kimmelman, 2005) This is, in fact, the role of confession - presenting negative elements of life, violating social, moral, religious (in particular) rules. Confession has never been the exploration of excitement, joy, of fun but that of the common elements of the existence.

Further on, and in contradiction with the literary theories of Eliot's and Pound's, Lowell and the confessional poets themselves have acknowledged the need for other directions in poetry by setting up a distance between them and what was before. With the increasing need to uncover their proximity to the reader and necessity of finding the attention offered by the receptacle of their works with the use of special poetic means, Lowell and Snodgrass, Berryman, Plath and Sexton rediscovered public confession. That is Alvarez's statement "Robert Lowell and John Berryman […] had assimilated the lesson of Eliot and the critical thirties: they assumed that a poet, to earn his title, had to be very skilful, very original, and very intelligent. But they were no longer concerned with Eliot's rearguard action against the late Romantics; they were, I mean, no longer adherents of the cult of rigid impersonality." (Alvarez, 1973) The poets of confession put everything in the forefront, paving a new path in the culture of humanity and "I" becomes the keyword of creation.

Confession is characterized by its degree of intimacy. What makes us to call a poem *confessional* is not only its subject (family, sex, alcoholism, insanity) or emphasizing the self but the immediacy with which such things are presented. Direct and often extreme in style and in the addressing mode, Snodgrass's, Lowell's, Sexton's and Plath's poems comprise a wide range of tones from sad whisper to theatrical screaming, says David Yezzi in a great article dedicated to confessional poets. (Yezzi, 14) What they have in common, what distinguishes them from other poems that incorporate details of life is

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the art of simulating honesty. Based on the facts of real world relationships, for the authenticity of a poem, this creates a work of artifice and of sincerity. Confessional poetry tends to be the real truth, the fictional, the biographical, the assumed to be biographical, and the shocking one, all in order to present life in its nakedness.

In an interview for *The Paris Review* about writing poetry, Robert Lowell says "I'm sure that writing isn't a craft, that is, something for which you learn the skills and go on turning out. It must come from some deep impulse, deep inspiration. That can't be taught..." (Lowell, par.7)

Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath attended Robert Lowell's poetry writing classes in the late '50s and, as we see in their poems, they took Lowell's advice regarding poetry writing and the use of personal feeling in poetry.

W. D. Snodgrass, one of the confessional poets, published in the same year, 1959, as Robert Lowell (*Life Studies*), *Heart's Needle*. The poet, in an interview in 1994 given to Alexandra Eyle in the same *The Paris Review*, entitled *WD Snodgrass, The Art of Poetry No.68*, offers his own definition of confessional poetry "I never cared for the term *confessional* in the least. Without any disrespect to M.L. Rosenthal, I think it's a journalistic tag, not very accurate. It sounds either like you're some kind of religious poet, which I am not, or as if you write bedroom memoirs, and I hope I don't come under that heading. […] My poems were called confessional because I wrote about the facts of my own life, and particularly about losing a daughter in a divorce; you weren't supposed to do that then." (Snodgrass, par.27) Despite the fact that Rosenthal denies the label given (that of a confessional poet) he accepts the umbrella under which are seated the confessional poets who write about the less happy experiences of their existence. The explanation offered by Snodgrass is superficial, incomplete and limited only at the first meaning of the word *confession*, without mentioning its expansion in time. The ironic reference to the bedroom memoirs rather alludes to the literature written by women, he, obviously, excluding himself to the area which he considers to be far less representative to the sacred themes tackled by the Pulitzer winner for poetry in 1960, award that brought him a series of disappointments which further helped the poet in being a prolific author of poetry.

Confessional poetry is not an empty poetry, despite its simplicity. It has quite a few coloristic, symbolic and, mythological ornaments of style. The confessional poetry is the poetry of directness. The poet does not use the famous TS Eliot's *objective correlative* because it does not need any intermediary through which to communicate. However, poets often use the *objective correlative* for different reasons which don't belong to this short presentation. As it is, one example of poetry that uses the famous formula is very suggestive to our presentation and that is Sylvia Plath's *Tale of a Tub* „The photographic chamber of the eye/ records bare painted walls, while an electric light/ flays the chromium nerves of plumbing raw;/ such poverty assaults the ego;…/" (Plath, 1981)

The poet is not hiding behind any other personae but, he or she needs the support of external elements, the senses, and of the tradition to create. Do not forget, however, that Eliot is one of the poets that founded the modern poetry and Snodgrass and Lowell are those who have studied and tried to imitate his work. Eliot and Pound are theoreticians

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of modern poetry, are the ones who brought it into a new place, from which all the other poets were able to create and to move on.

The major difference between what Eliot embodied in his essays and what the confessional poets create is linked to "I", the freedom to express themselves rather than the way in which poetry is born, its external form, the simplicity or the ornamentation, the obvious intertext or the lack of that, the tradition behind the individual talent.

We are not talking here of a literary movement that destroys everything that has been created until the moment the new theory emerges, an avant-garde faction that denies any creation which does not fall under new rules, but, rather, a method to write poetry taking as model the classic rules. Confessional poetry borrows from the Romantics the elements of discourse, and the tone, as I mentioned in this paper.

Regardless of what caused them, confessional poems are the result of a crisis drawn from social, political, cultural contexts that participated in the creation of a new poetry, has lasted over time, and it is widely read and written nowadays.

Confessional poets brought into the limelight the oldest type of confession – the public one, stating that nothing was outrageous or immoral, nothing is made to be hidden from the reader's eye and everything can be said because in this way the burden is taken off the shoulders of the supposed sinner.

The 20th century confessional poets set the tone of bringing everything into everyone's attention, they opened a wide path for public confession that was not only restricted to poetry but became widely used in culture, media and in many other fields.

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