CONFESS – DISCLOSE – PROCLAIM: THE TROPE OF SELF-REVELATION IN AMERICAN POETRY SINCE THE SIXTIES

Thomas AUSTENFELD

Department of English, Faculty of Humanities, University of Fribourg
Avenue de l'Europe 20, 1700 Fribourg, Switzerland
Email: thomas.austenfeld@unifr.ch

ABSTRACT: Confessional poetry, pioneered by Lowell and Sexton, has left traces in the contemporary lyric. Addressing the reader has become a staple of identitarian writing prominent since the 1960s. Dana Gioia, Rita Dove, Natasha Trethewey, and others have turned acts of confession into moments of disclosure or even self-confident proclamations. The contemporary "lyrical I" is therefore in significant ways the rightful inheritor of the confessional breakthrough.

KEYWORDS: confessional poetry; Robert Lowell; the age of Lowell; Dana Gioia; Rita Dove; Natasha Trethewey; Kim Addonizio; identity

In this small contribution to literary history I shall argue that the confessional mode of American poetry, in tandem with the sociologically rooted changes in the American canon since the 1960s, inaugurated fundamental modifications in lyrical expression which should be understood as the afterlife of confessional poetry. By addressing the ostensibly private lyric outward in the form of a public utterance, confessional poets helped pave the way for making the disclosure of personality and identity commonplace. In the lyric poem of our day, subject matter that may originally have seemed fit for shameful confessions has been modified into matter-of-fact disclosure and finally into a declamatory identitarian proclamation. The contemporary "lyrical I" is therefore in significant ways the rightful inheritor of the confessional breakthrough.

The trope of self-revelation in American poetry goes back at least to Walt Whitman and the iconic opening of his "Song of Myself" (1855): "I celebrate myself."[1] In that first version, the half-sentence "and sing myself" did not yet appear.

> I celebrate myself,
> And what I assume you shall assume,
> For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.[2]

[1] Walt Whitman, *Complete Poetry and Collected Prose* (New York: Library of America, 1982), 27.

[2] Whitman, *Complete Poetry and Collected Prose*, 27.

The opening verb, *celebrate*, turned into a reflexive by Whitman, is deceptive. We are likely to hear only the overtones of festivity and leisure, perhaps even a narcissistic focus on the self. But Whitman is not just speaking of exaltation and holiday. The root meaning of *celeber* in Latin, originally attributed to the celebration of Mass in the fifteenth century, is "'frequented, populous, crowded,' with transferred senses of 'well-attended; famous; often-repeated'"[3] or even "renowned."[4] At the very start of the last century-and-a-half of American poetry, then, literally from the first verb of "Song of Myself" onwards, the declaration of the self is a public act. The celebration begins with the self but it does not end there. The many catalogues of persons and events that will be evoked later in Whitman's *oeuvre* exist *in nuce* in its first line. While much lyric poetry historically has been a private matter, the gesture of turning outward in a self-declaration is integral to the genre in the American context. Whitman's voice announces the beginning of confessional poetry, if not in name, then in spirit.

Precisely one hundred years after Whitman's "Song of Myself," in October, 1955, Allen Ginsberg read "Howl" at the Six Gallery in San Francisco. Spoken by one voice, it is nonetheless a poem that offers the self-revelation of an entire group in its first line: "I saw the best minds *of my generation* destroyed by madness starving hysterical naked."[5] When Robert Lowell published *Life Studies* just a few years later, in 1959, the dominant forms of American poetry were no longer private utterances but public declarations. The "confessional mode," as it was to be called soon thereafter,[6] though understood originally in analogy to the private confession made to a priest or the private disclosure confided to a psychiatrist, was to be a public act made visible through publication. This double-edged nature of confessional poetry—its material generated in intense self-preoccupation, but its rhetoric firmly directed outward—has only recently been resuscitated and acknowledged in scholarship.

---

[3] *Online Etymology Dictionary*, s.v. "celebrate," accessed July 13, 2014, http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=celebrate&allowed_in_frame=0.

[4] *Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology*, comp. T. C. Onions (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966), s.v. "celebrate."

[5] Allen Ginsberg, *Collected Poems, 1947–1997* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2006), 134. Italics added.

[6] The terms "confessional" goes back to M. L. Rosenthal, "Poetry as Confession," *Nation*, no. 189 (1959): 154–55. Its usefulness has been challenged from time to time, but no better term has been found.

Just a decade ago, the confessional mode, by critical consensus, was considered as self-indulgent, narcissistic, and even apolitical. The term itself seemed unusable. Jo Gill nicely summarized in 2004:

> Confessional poetry is now . . . regarded as a regrettable, aberrant, and momentary spasm in the development of [American] literature. . . . Its chief impact is now understood as providing a foil against which to measure the sophistication and achievements of postconfessional writing.[7]

Applied to the work of writers less accomplished than Lowell, this kind of critique can be accurate. But I would like to emphasize here how much the confessional mode signaled not only an unblinkered exploration of the poet's psyche but also was a form of address directed to readers. The latest scholarship on confessional poetry, being conducted mostly in dissertations, has tended to re-appreciate its public and political qualities. Adam Beardsworth counters the conventional wisdom by first admitting that confessional poets, "forgoing the impersonality of modernist idiom, . . . developed a poetics of personality that has often been dismissed by critics as maudlin and narcissistic."[8] But, he claims, "the turn to an autobiographic style emerged as a covert means of expressing political dissent."[9] Deidre Price sees confessional poetry as careful self-staging and relates it to contemporary blogs as forms of autobiography that also calls forth intense reactions. Her study of Anne Sexton's work in relation to contemporary *mommyblogging* is particularly interesting.[10] Laura Passin shows how contemporary poets benefit from a "lyrical I" that both designates a poetic voice and invites the reader to equate that voice with the person of the poet; a kind of "lyrical I" made possible by confessional poets.[11]

Two additional critics have recently taken as a common point of departure their disagreement with Helen Vendler who characterizes poetry as "the genre of private life: it is what we say to ourselves when we are alone."[12] Rejecting this claim, Daniel Morris in *Lyric Encounters* focuses on poetic texts

---

[7] Jo Gill, "Textual Confessions: Narcissism in Anne Sexton's Early Poetry," *Twentieth-Century Literature* 50, no. 1 (2004): 59.

[8] Adam Beardsworth, "Cold War Confessions: Autobiographic Poetry in the Age of Anxiety," PhD diss., Memorial University of Newfoundland, 2008, ii.

[9] Beardsworth, "Cold War Confessions," ii.

[10] See Deidre Price, "Confessional Poetry and Blog Culture in the Age of Autobiography," PhD diss., Florida State University, 2010, vi.

[11] See Laura Passin, "The Lyric in the Age of Theory: The Politics and Poetics of Confession in Contemporary American Poetry," PhD diss., Northwestern University, 2013, 2.

[12] Helen Vendler, *Poems, Poets, Poetry* (Boston: Bedford Books, 1997), x.

that are encounters "between a lyric speaker . . . and another character" or even "between lyric poetry and other texts."[13] Morris argues reasonably that post-9/11 America has witnessed a fuller share of texts of social encounter, so that drama and prose fiction no longer hold exclusive claim to the association of what he calls "the intertextual aesthetics and interpersonal ethics"[14] that characterize these genres. And it is not just post-9/11 literature: these insights can be applied retroactively. Jane Hedley, in *I Made You to Find Me: The Coming of Age of the Woman Poet and the Politics of Poetic Address*, observes about Anne Sexton: "In the poems that created her reputation as a Confessional poet she is almost always confessing *to* someone: she has an interlocutor within the poem itself."[15] If we accept the strong readerly appeal in confessional poems thus described, the alliance of confessional technique and subject matter with identitarian writing will become clearer.

Aligning myself with these recent discussions of the confessional mode as essentially both open and partially staged—and definitely not limited to the exposure of false shame, embarrassing family secrets, and psychological exhibitionism—I would like to bring the seismic sociological changes of the American canon over the course of the past fifty years back into view. The 1960s, the heyday of confessionalism, also signaled the beginning of the general opening of the American canon. In the wake of the Civil Rights movement, African American writers gained fuller access to the canon. Soon, Native Americans, Hispanic Americans, and Asian Americans were to follow, with gay and lesbian writers the latest addition to the canon in recent years. Women writers had been steadily gaining access to the canon throughout, but only with the 1960s did they do so *as* women writers. The generation preceding Betty Friedan, that is to say, the Jean Staffords, Mary McCarthys, Elizabeth Hardwicks, and Flannery O'Connors of the 1940s and 1950s definitely gained their access to the canon *as writers*, not as *women* writers, just like the generation before them with Katherine Anne Porter and Kay Boyle, both of whom steadfastly opposed feminism as somehow injurious to their reputation as writers. As David Laskin has observed about Hardwick's generation, "because they were successful, at least by their own lights, they

[13] Daniel Morris, *Lyric Encounters: Essays on American Poetry from Lazarus and Frost to Ortiz Cofer and Alexie* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 4. Jane Hedley discusses the concept of "poetic address" in greater detail and in contrast to Vendler as well. See Jane Hedley, *I Made You to Find Me: The Coming of Age of the Woman Poet and the Politics of Poetic Address* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2009), 6–8.

[14] Morris, *Lyric Encounters*, 6.

[15] Hedley, *I Made You to Find Me*, 25.

refused to see the point of feminism. Gender had been no impediment in their own careers, every one of them insisted at various times in her life."[16]

With the enlarging of the canon starting in the 1960s, American literature developed into what I would like to call an "identitarian" direction.[17] Literary texts came to public attention in part because of who had written them: a minority member, someone with a privileged viewpoint or access to a particular condition, someone previously silenced. *The Heath Anthology* edited by Paul Lauter has been one of the most visible agents of this new consciousness. Identitarian thinking has put more, and more interesting, texts before us. Its greatest benefit has been to get us away from a single version of history and to make much writing more authentic, though it has not absolved us from making aesthetic judgments.

One remarkable and, so far, understudied consequence of this identitarian bent in its intrinsic connection with confessional writing is the now-common practice of writers, poets included, to readily disclose their personal dispositions, practically as a prerequisite to beginning their work. Again, Walt Whitman may have started it, but his gesture, "I now thirty-seven years old in perfect health begin,"[18] is not a declaration we find echoed much in the next hundred years until, that is, confessional poets come back to it, though they rarely celebrate "perfect health." Prufrock complains about his age and his receding hairline, but we do not readily mistake him for Eliot. Understanding Stevens' personality is not essential to an understanding of his poems: he is not, himself, Peter Quince at the Clavier even if the poet speaks of "my fingers" in the first line and of "I" in the fifth.[19] But Robert Lowell *is* the

---

[16] David Laskin, *Partisans: Marriage, Politics, and Betrayal among the New York Intellectuals* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 11.

[17] I borrow the term "identitarian" from Marianne DeKoven, who argues that postmodern performativity "contests . . . identitarian essentialism." Marianne DeKoven, *Utopia Limited: The Sixties and the Emergence of the Postmodern* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 255. The book is interested in entirely different questions from the ones I discuss here. My paper does not address confessional poetry in connection with postmodernism; rather, it draws together confession and identity as rhetorical positions in work done after Lowell. The adjective "identitarian" usefully describes the etiology of the expanded canon. I have written elsewhere that "identitarian qualities contribute to, but do not exhaust, a writer's character." Thomas Austenfeld, "Louise Erdrich in Company: The American Writer and Her Communities," in *Critical Insights: Louise Erdrich, ed. Jane Hafen* (Pasadena: Salem Press, 2013), 75.

[18] Whitman, *Complete Poetry and Collected Prose*, 188. This line does not appear in the 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass*.

[19] Wallace Stevens, *Collected Poetry and Prose* (New York: Library of America, 1997), 72.

one who "hogs a whole house" in "Memories of West Street and Lepke";[20] Anne Sexton speaks about her own menstruation,[21] and Natasha Trethewey about her own mixed-race parents in her poetry and about her brother's jail time in *Beyond Katrina: A Meditation of the Mississippi Gulf Coast.*

Disclosing one's identitarian characteristics—race, class, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, religion, disability, other "markers"—has a certain ethical charm to it. Readers assume that a writer's pronouncements about one's situation are genuinely based in experience. Before I look more closely at the poets whose confessional and post-confessional identitarian declarations I want to discuss, I would like to speculate on a term that might serve to capture the phenomenon I have been describing and that may buttress my assertion that convention gave way to self-disclosure in the sixties.

I propose "the age of identitarian poetry" as a term that might neatly describe an important segment of the poetic production from Lowell to the present, at least to capture that segment of poetic history not covered by the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E movement. Our present critical temperament is deeply skeptical of the notion of an "age" as a literary category and even more so of associating a reigning literary practice with an individual person. "The age of Chaucer" and the "modern age," also such terms as the "age of Jefferson" or "a secular age," still seem to be viable categories, but the idea that a definable period in more recent literary history could be called an "age" has disappeared. We have learned to distrust such totalizing narratives. The last poet who used the term unironically was Randall Jarrell, in his 1953 *Poetry and the Age.* In a key piece in that collection, he lambasts his present "age of criticism" as definitely not being "an age of writing, nor an age of reading."[22] Jarrell quotes Elizabeth Bishop: "After I go through one of the literary quarterlies I don't feel like reading a poem for a week, much less like writing one."[23] And the last critic to have used the term in this sense was perhaps Irvin Ehrenpreis who spoke of the "age of Lowell" in 1965.

Given Lowell's poetic drift through the later sixties with his obsessive revisions of seemingly endless sonnet sequences, Ehrenpreis may have been mistaken about the epochal character of Lowell at the time, but he does not deserve the misrepresentation he has earned in our day. Critics bandy about the term "age of Lowell" dismissively but do not give credit to Ehrenpreis. Jed Rasula titled a section of his monumental tome *The American Poetry Wax*

[20] In the 1959 volume *Life Studies.*
[21] See Anne Sexton, *The Complete Poems* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981), 137–38.
[22] Randall Jarrell, *Poetry and the Age* (London: Faber and Faber, 1955), 73.
[23] Jarrell, *Poetry and the Age,* 73.

Museum "~~The Age of~~ Lowell" but struck out the words "the age of." Rasula writes:

> The poet who personified the postwar American bard was Robert Lowell. He was the poet whose actions set the pace and dramatized the Puritan backdrop into the bargain. But was he indicative? Was it really, after the Age of Auden, the Age of Lowell? Thomas Parkinson admits "It makes me uneasy to hear the period from c. 1945 to the present referred to as "the Age of Lowell' – the phrase has a tinny fabricated sound. Lowell was something we reacted to and against but there was never a sense of coziness about the whole thing."[24]

Something has gone wrong here. In 1965 (the essay was written before, and published after, *For the Union Dead* appeared) Ehrenpreis merely claimed that "from a glance at Lowell's most recent work, coming out in periodicals, one can prophesy that his next book will establish his name as that normally thought of for 'the' American poet."[25] He sees Lowell as the successor to Frost; Auden is nowhere mentioned. Nowhere does Ehrenpreis make a period claim "from 1945 to the present" which, for Parkinson, would have to extend to 1987, exceeding Lowell's lifetime by ten years. Rasula and Parkinson seem to be engaged in constructing a classic "straw man" argument. Yet if the "age of Lowell" can mean something to us today, it might well signal a manner of speaking in poetry, a mode of confession that opened the doors to the revelations and declarations of the poets of the two following generations. The "Age of Lowell," it appears, materialized only after Lowell himself had left the stage. Today, we may better appreciate that Lowell's version of confessional writing inaugurated an age of identitarian poetry.

In 2011, critic Aidan Wasley surprised the literary world with a book unironically titled *The Age of Auden*. Ehrenpreis was not, after all, the last person to use the concept of "age" in critical writing. Wasley's richly annotated book invites us to reconsider the underappreciated contribution that Auden made to American poets of Lowell's generation and thereafter. In particular, however, with chapters devoted to James Merrill, John Ashbery, and Adrienne Rich, Wasley traces Auden's poetical influence on the major gay and lesbian poets of the recent American tradition. Confessionalism as a mode of poetic expression is not at the center of his argument.

---

[24] Quoted in Steven Gould Axelrod, *The Critical Response to Robert Lowell* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1999), 283–84. In this excerpt, Rasula quotes Thomas Parkinson's *Poets, Poems, Movements* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1987), 215.

[25] Irvin Ehrenpreis, "The Age of Lowell," in *Robert Lowell: A Portrait of the Artist in His Time*, ed. Michael London and Robert Boyers (New York: David Lewis, 1970), 182.

If *age* is no longer palatable, if *generations* is perceived as too canonical and patriarchal, we still need to account for changes in literary history. It has become fashionable to speak of *turns* and *moments*. I favor the metaphor of development. The arc reaching from the shame of confession via matter-of-fact disclosure to declamatory proclamation needs to be more fully understood. With a few exemplary texts, I shall now try to illustrate my contention. My chosen topics are death, introspection, menstruation, and racial identity—large topics, suitable for ambitious poets. I'll begin with death.

Dana Gioia (b. 1950) is often classified as a "neoformalist" poet though just a portion of his poetic output observes strict form. He seems initially an unlikely choice for my argument. Having come to national attention with his *Atlantic Monthly* essay, "Can Poetry Matter?" in 1991, he later served as chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts. A student of Robert Fitzgerald and Elizabeth Bishop, Gioia has written deeply affecting poems but his speakers often ironize themselves in a way that confessional poets do not. Thus, in "My Confessional Sestina" Gioia skewers the poetry workshop establishment with its mass-produced graduates who are not poets even though they may have placed a sestina somewhere: "Let me confess. I'm sick of these sestinas / written by youngsters in poetry workshops."[26] In his long dramatic poem, "The Homecoming,"[27] Gioia is not himself the "I" who speaks the poem—an orphan who killed his foster mother and is now waiting for the police to arrive—but his ability to take on *personae* in the manner of Browning or Pound certainly has kept Gioia before the public eye, though he does not write in the confessional mode *per se*.

Yet in spite of all his rhetorical control, Gioia is capable of both "disclosing" and "proclaiming" and to thus employ the successor modes to "confessing." In "Planting a Sequoia," the poet commemorates the death of his infant son, an autobiographical event. The poem is addressed to the tree, "Digging this hole, laying you into it," though the eerie overtone of the burial of a corpse hovers over the lines.[28] The speaker-poet controls his grief through the ritual actions described in the poem, but the grief is nonetheless disclosed. Objective correlatives of grief—a lock of hair, illustrations of the *tempus fugit* topos in the scattering of the family—carry the reader through the text. The revelation of the speaker's grief is achieved by identification, as the poet gathers the reader into the sentiment that the poem expresses.

In the case of a white, male poet (notwithstanding his ethnically quite diverse ancestry), the question of how someone like Dana Gioia would "pro-

[26] Dana Gioia, *The Gods of Winter* (Saint Paul: Graywolf Press, 1991), 31–32.
[27] Gioia, *The Gods of Winter*, 39–52.
[28] Gioia, *The Gods of Winter*, 10.

claim" himself, as I posit in this paper, is particularly interesting. How does a member of the establishment, so to speak, negotiate the identitarian practices of today's literary market? I believe he does it by using the rare second-person address to someone, an interlocutor, who is in many ways the poet himself. As we saw above, a form of outward address may well be the distinguishing feature of post-Lowellian poetry. As a practicing Roman Catholic, Gioia is mentally prepared like few others to adopt and adapt the confessional mode by translating it from its ecclesiastical setting into the mental world of the poet himself.[29] More clearly than any poet, perhaps, since Lowell himself ("Father, forgive me / my injuries, / as I forgive / those I have injured!"),[30] Gioia confesses and, by confessing, reveals and proclaims his identity. Regularly throughout his career, he has interspersed his volumes with poems that enact a confession, even if he gently ridicules confessional poetry. In the title poem of his third collection, "Interrogations at Noon," the poet-speaker, by way of an examination of conscience, converses with "the better man [he] might have been, / Who chronicles the life [he's] never led."[31] The self-flagellation that follows, spoken in the words of the *alter ego*, is practically without parallel in modern letters: the speaker is effectively condemned by his alter ego for vanity, failure, lying, and empty extravagance.

In another example, "The Heart of the Matter," Gioia casts the speaker in the role of a father confessor: "Come sit beside me. I've waited alone. / What you need to confess I already know."[32] But the subject matter of the remainder of the poem discloses far more about the penitent than the ostensible speaker so that it becomes clear, quite quickly, that this is another poem of self-examination, in which penitent and confessor can't be told apart since they are heuristic projections of the same person. Similarly, although the dramatic setup of "Starting Over"[33] situates the speaker in the role of

---

[29] Gioia thinks deeply about the Catholic tradition in the literary arts; see, for example, his essay "The Catholic Writer Today," *First Things*, December 2013. In section 2 of his essay, he remarks adroitly, "Catholic literature is rarely pious. In ways that sometimes trouble or puzzle both Protestant and secular readers, Catholic writing tends to be comic, rowdy, rude, and even violent. Catholics generally prefer to write about sinners rather than saints."

[30] Lowell built this self-centered allusion to The Lord's Prayer into his poem "Middle Age" in *For the Union Dead*. See Robert Lowell, *Collected Poems* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003), 325.

[31] Dana Gioia, *Interrogations at Noon* (Saint Paul: Graywolf Press, 2001), 5.

[32] Dana Gioia, *Pity the Beautiful* (Saint Paul: Graywolf Press, 2012), 46.

[33] Gioia, *Pity the Beautiful*, 66–67. It is the penultimate poem of the collection.

the confessor (i.e., the one to whom something is being confessed), it is easy to understand this address also as a hidden self-address. Even if a second person is there to initiate the conversation, the insights about that person are more valuable to the speaker who pronounces them than to their ostensible addressee: "starting over" is repetitive, failure is pre-programmed, dissipation is the fate of human beings, each new venture has its eventual failure written into its very beginnings.

Dana Gioia and Rita Dove, born in 1950 and 1952 respectively, belong, remarkably enough, to the same chronological moment though they produce very different kind of work. And yet they both comfortably reveal and assert, in the wake of the confessional tradition. Two poems by Rita Dove, written about fifteen years apart, emblematize for me the transition from "disclose" to "proclaim" that her work illustrates. "After Reading *Mickey in the Night Kitchen* for the Third Time before Bed," collected in *Grace Notes* (1989) refers to Maurice Sendak's famous but controversial illustrated children's book. Its incantatory line, "I'm in the milk and the milk's in me!" which forms the epigraph to the poem is echoed, with an interesting variation, in the poem itself.[34] The poem describes an intimate mother-daughter moment before bed when the three-year old ("She's three; that makes this innocent" the speaker insists, anticipating her audience's reactions) demands to compare her vagina to her mother's. The mother takes the opportunity to teach an initial lesson about menstruation:

> Every month she wants
> to know where it hurts
> and what the wrinkled string means
> between my legs.
> . . . . . .
> How to tell her that it's what makes us—
> black mother, cream child.
> That we're in the pink
> and the pink's in us.[35]

This poem is autobiographical. Dove is talking about herself, "black mother," and her "cream" child, whose father is a light-skinned German. "Cream" takes us semantically back to *In the Night Kitchen*, a book I remember well from reading it to my own daughter. Dove's poem ends not in a primarily racial experience but in an assertion of femininity, the "pink" of menstrual blood and of the vaginal labia, a color and an experience shared ("*We're pink!* / she shrieks, and bounds off") among mother and daughter with dif-

[34] Rita Dove, *Grace Notes* (New York: Norton, 1989), 41.
[35] Dove, *Grace Notes*, 41.

fering degrees of skin pigmentation. Yet, while the speaker succeeds in asserting the "innocence" of this moment in the sense of a child's artlessness or ingenuousness, the moment nonetheless conveys knowledge by turning the daughter from unknowing to knowing. The synecdoche of "vagina" for "woman" might be seen as veering uncomfortably close, for our contemporary sensitivity, to sexualizing a black female—all the more important, then, to insist on the "innocence" of the moment.[36]

Sendak's *In the Night Kitchen* continues to be criticized in certain quarters[37] largely because of its portrayal of a naked boy whose genitals can be distinguished in the illustrations both before he dips into the bread dough and after the kneaded dough falls off of him and he floats in the milk bottle. The *topos* of unclothing, revealing, bringing out into the open, which is shared across the children's book and Dove's poem, places this text firmly into a historical moment when the false shame that may have been connected with the portrayal of nakedness at one point has been thoroughly left in the past and has given way to a sober discussion of private parts and private topics. Dove's "Mickey" poem unabashedly discusses the string of a tampon and menstrual blood, but does so in a way that has successfully replaced false shame with genuine education.

To see how far we have come since the beginning days of confessional poetry, we need only look back to Anne Sexton (born in 1928, a decade after Lowell) whose poetic voice was in part shaped by Lowell in his Boston University classes which Sexton attended. Her poem "Menstruation at Forty" (originally titled "Menstruation at Thirty-Five") is interesting to me here less in its biographical sourcing, already well-studied, in which one can learn about the poet's fear of having become pregnant by a casual lover during her European travels in October 1963.[38] More remarkable to me is the connection

[36] Pat Righelato observes that "Mickey" "has achieved some fame through Dove's public readings of it. . . . The opening seems didactic, as if this is a poem about politically correct liberal frankness. It *deals* with the worthy feminist topic of a mother teaching her daughter about genitalia and menstruation, but it has a nice punning conclusion that conflates internal anatomy, racial composition, and well-being." Pat Righelato, *Understanding Rita Dove* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2006), 122. I should add that "Mickey" is also one of the three poems Dove chose as her own contribution to *The Penguin Anthology of Twentieth-Century American Poetry* which she edited in 2011.

[37] The American Library Association lists In the Night Kitchen as number twenty-five of its "100 Most Frequently Challenged Books: 1990–2000." *American Library Association*, accessed July 13, 2014. http://www.ala.org/advocacy/banned/frequentlychallenged/challengedbydecade/1990_2000.

[38] See Diane Wood Middlebrook, *Anne Sexton: A Biography* (London: Virago, 1991), 208–9.

the speaker draws between her potential pregnancy, now clearly ended by the onset of her menstrual cycle, and the anticipation of her own birthday, two days ahead: both events to her signify death, and a particularly bloody death at that. Several ostensibly taboo topics—menstruation and death—are compulsively yoked together as if in a primitive ritual. The speaker is at least as afraid of the son she might have conceived as she is troubled by his not having come into being. The confessional tone of the poem is created through the unsparing clinical proximity with which Sexton forces her audience to share her mental and physical suffering. In ghastly images, the menstrual blood is transformed into the arterial blood of two wrists cut open, "blood worn like a corsage / to bloom,"[39] and the possible disappointment over the hoped-for pregnancy is a sickness unto death. Emotional upheaval around the time of the onset of menstruation may have been particularly intense for Sexton. In the context of the early sixties, the "confessional" aspect of this poem resides mostly in the clinical frankness about the physicality of menstrual blood, a topic conventionally reserved for mother-daughter conversations and the sanctity of the medical office. In Sexton's poem, the fact alone that so much blood is made to be the material subject matter of the poem constitutes a break with convention, together with the suicidal consequences that result from the realization of the non-fulfillment of motherhood potential. Sexton's confession does not turn on guilt. Rather, it appears to turn a supposedly natural and healthy process into one focused on self-destruction and death. The speaker's dramatized inability to absorb this experience coherently into her life makes this a truly "raw" confessional poem. But it is obvious how much societal shame-potential needs to be cleared out of the way for this poem to have existence! Confession in its early stage had not yet arrived at comfortable disclosure, let alone proud proclamation. For Sexton, the onset of her menstrual period in October of 1963 is a life-or-death question. As we saw above with Rita Dove, menstruation can become the topic of a deftly-handled poem that discloses matter-of-factly, with even a didactic strain.

Dove has in many ways most perfectly captured the transition from "revelation" to "proclamation" that I posit. She is equally as comfortable talking about race as about menstruation. Fifteen years after *Grace Notes*, in *American Smooth* (2004), a book in which ballroom dancing becomes an extended synecdoche for artistic production, Dove riffs repeatedly on the social place she (by now a famous poet in ostensibly post-racial America) occupies in the world of ballroom dancing. In "Brown," the tension between adulation,

[39] Sexton, *The Complete Poems*, 138.

transgression, and questions of color is particularly evident: the speaker and the subject of the poem, Rita Dove, commands the room and makes hilarious fun of the event (calling the waltz a "constipated swoon" is, I believe, a nice and rhythmically calibrated aural response to Langston Hughes's famous line about the "syncopated tune" in "The Weary Blues"[40]):

Brown
Why you look good in every color!
the dress lady gurgled, just before
I stepped onto the parquet
for a waltz. . . .
. . . . . .
Don't
get me wrong. I've always loved
my skin, the way it glows against
citron and fuchsia, the difficult hues,
but the difference I cause
whenever I walk into a polite space
is why I prefer grand entrances—
especially with a Waltz,
that European constipated
swoon.
The dress in question was red.[41]

This is not a poem that merely reveals. This one asserts. It proudly displays the speaker as a black woman, in a red dress. It is a post-millennial declaration of identity. Confession has given way to self-confident assertion.

Kim Addonizio, born in 1954, manages to ring the changes on a similar red dress as the ultimate expression of physical and sexual self-revelation. In "What Do Women Want?" from the collection *Tell Me* (2004), she proclaims,

I want a red dress.
I want it flimsy and cheap,
I want it too tight, I want to wear it
until someone tears it off me.
I want it sleeveless and backless,
this dress, so no one has to guess
what's underneath.
. . . . . .
And I'll wear it like bones, like skin,

---

[40] Langston Hughes, "The Weary Blues," in *The Norton Anthology of Modern and Contemporary Poetry*, ed. Jahan Ramazani (New York: Norton, 2003), 1:688.
[41] Dove, *American Smooth*, 23–24.

it'll be the goddamned
dress they bury me in.[42]

Here, the literally revealing dress and the self-assertion of the speaker are rolled into one. Addonizio, whose work has been called "tough-minded" and "tender-hearted" by Dana Gioia,[43] proclaims the speaker's confidence in formally adroit language. End-rhymes in this poem (dress/-less/guess and skin/in) are complemented in other poems by rich allusion to poetic history through which Addonizio inscribes herself as its inheritor. For example, her "The First Line Is the Deepest" from the 2009 volume *Lucifer at the Starlite* is a firework of allusions to a compendium of English-language poetry. Few contemporary poets have more fun with form than Addonizio: she even invented a form she calls a "sonnenizio" complete with a fake history for it. Addonizio writes poems that may make first- and second-generation feminists cringe, but her frankness about sexual desire positively coded as feminine demonstrates that identitarian proclamation is now a customary aspect of the lyrical self.

Natasha Trethewey, born 1966, from our presently most active generation of writers, was US poet laureate from 2012 to 2014 and has made the topic of racial awareness one of the main foci of her poetry. Drawing from autobiographical experience, she writes about her family and their lives on the Mississippi Gulf Coast. Her first book of poems, *Domestic Work* (2000), was dedicated to her father and featured an introduction by none other than Rita Dove. In these few lines from a characteristic Trethewey poem, "My Mother Dreams Another Country" (from *Native Guard*, 2006), the poet imagines a moment just before she herself was born:

Already the words are changing. She is changing
    from *colored* to *negro*, *black* still years ahead.
This is 1966—she is married to a white man—
    and there are more names for what grows inside her.
It is enough to worry about words like *mongrel*
    and the infertility of mules and *mulattoes* . . .[44]

It is a poem about the tenuousness of identity. The changes the speaker's mother undergoes as her pregnancy progresses are mysteriously linked to the changing terms for black identity that the next decade will bring to the United States. Revelation and assertion are increasingly difficult to distin-

[42] Kim Addonizio, *Tell Me* (Rochester: BOA, 2000), 74.
[43] Quoted in Kim Addonizio, *What Is This Thing Called Love* (New York: Norton, 2004), back cover.
[44] Natasha Trethewey, *Native Guard* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2007), 37.

guish. This moment in American history, when the Civil Rights Movement is building up to its violent climax, also gives Trethewey occasion to compose a retrospective meditation, in the form of a ghazal, on one of the South's most loaded terms:

Miscegeneation

In 1965 my parents broke two laws of Mississippi;
they went to Ohio to marry, returned to Mississippi.

They crossed the river into Cincinnati, a city whose name
begins with a sound like *sin*, the sound of wrong—*mis* in Mississippi[45]

This poem grants agency to the speaker's parents, acknowledges that they had to hide the actions that she is now free to disclose. In so doing, she respectfully lays open for inspection the action of her parents and the influence these had upon her. This poem, then, discloses Trethewey's thoughts on her own history and the sociological positioning of her parents at the time of her birth.

Six years after this poem, in a historically yet more profound study of the obsession that the early eighteenth century had with the mixing of races, in her selection *Thrall*, Trethewey meditates on selected *casta* paintings by Mexican artist Juan Rodriguez Juàrez. In the punningly titled "Enlightenment," a comment both on the age of Thomas Jefferson and on the lighter skin that normally characterizes mixed-race offspring, Trethewey thinks about the complex relationship she has had with her white father, which climaxes in a dramatic playlet they enact among themselves as they visit Monticello and listen to the guide's talking about Sally Hemings, Jefferson's "quadroon mistress":

Imagine stepping back into the past,
our guide tells us then—and I can't resist

whispering to my father: *This is where*
we split up. I'll head around to the back.
When he laughs, I know he's grateful

I've made a joke of it, this history
that links us—white father, black daughter—
even as it renders us other to each other.[46]

This qualifies as a moment of assertion in my suggested taxonomy. "Enlightenment" is an identitarian pronouncement of a black woman who is herself privileged but fully aware of the tenuousness of this museal moment.

[45] Trethewey, *Native Guard*, 36.
[46] Natasha Trethewey, *Thrall* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2012), 71.

A genuine "imagine stepping back into the past" would require her to be outside, even if her father were ever so much a guest, or even the master, of the house. Her statement to her father proclaims her identity, a proclamation enlarged upon in the poem.

I have attempted to sample a poetic tradition of disclosure and revelation that traces its beginnings to the confessional poetry of the 1960s. Women poets have been prominent in this discussion, but Dana Gioia, the only male poet discussed in this essay besides Walt Whitman, continues to explore the subtle varieties of self-expression equally well. The poets I chose are prominent: Lowell and Sexton are, for many, equivalent with "confessional." Dove and Trethewey have been poets laureate, as was Lowell at a time when the position was known as "Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress." Gioia worked in the politics of art for a while. Addonizio carries on the revelatory tradition in poetry into the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Readers get ever closer to the revealed selves, not just of the speakers of the poems, as in pre-confessional poetry, but the poets themselves. Walt Whitman would surely be pleased with the contemporary poetry scene. "I am the poet of the woman the same as the man," he proclaimed in section 21 of "Song of Myself."[47] After 1959, two historical moments, the advent of confessional poetry and the enlarging of the American canon, came together to advance the possibilities of self-expression in lyric poems. Confessional poetry's afterlife has given us rich aesthetic opportunities. Identitarian writing must be appreciated more fully in its essential rhetorical turn to the other, to the audience, to the reader to which it speaks.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Addonizio, Kim. *Tell Me*. Rochester: BOA, 2000.

———. *What Is This Thing Called Love*. New York: Norton, 2004.

American Library Association. "100 Most Frequently Challenged Books: 1990–2000." *American Library Association*. Accessed July 13, 2014. http://www.ala.org/advocacy/banned/frequentlychallenged/challengedbydecade/1990_2000.

Austenfeld, Thomas. "Louise Erdrich in Company: The American Writer and Her Communities." In *Critical Insights: Louise Erdrich*, edited by Jane Hafen, 68–85. Pasadena: Salem Press, 2013.

Axelrod, Steven Gould, ed. *The Critical Response to Robert Lowell*. Westport: Greenwood Press, 1999.

Beardsworth, Adam. "Cold War Confessions: Autobiographic Poetry in the Age of Anxiety." PhD diss., Memorial University of Newfoundland, 2008.

[47] Whitman, *Complete Poetry and Collected Prose*, 207.

DeKoven, Marianne. *Utopia Limited: The Sixties and the Emergence of the Postmodern*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2004.
Dove, Rita. *American Smooth*. New York: Norton, 2004.
———. *Grace Notes*. New York: Norton, 1989.
Ehrenpreis, Irvin. "The Age of Lowell." In *Robert Lowell: A Portrait of the Artist in His Time*, edited by Michael London and Robert Boyers, 155–86. New York: David Lewis, 1970.
Gill, Jo. "Textual Confessions: Narcissism in Anne Sexton's Early Poetry." *Twentieth-Century Literature* 50, no. 1 (2004): 59–87.
Ginsberg, Allen. *Collected Poems, 1947–1997*. New York: Harper Perennial, 2006.
Gioia, Dana. "The Catholic Writer Today." *First Things*, December 2013. www.firstthings.com/article/2013/12/the-catholic-writer-today.
———. *The Gods of Winter*. Saint Paul: Graywolf Press, 1991.
———. *Interrogations at Noon*. Saint Paul: Graywolf Press, 2001.
———. *Pity the Beautiful*. Saint Paul: Graywolf Press, 2012.
Hedley, Jane. *I Made You to Find Me: The Coming of Age of the Woman Poet and the Politics of Poetic Address*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2009.
Hughes, Langston. "The Weary Blues." In *The Norton Anthology of Modern and Contemporary Poetry*, edited by Jahan Ramazani, vol. 1, 688. New York: Norton, 2003.
Jarrell, Randall. *Poetry and the Age*. London: Faber and Faber, 1955.
Laskin, David. *Partisans: Marriage, Politics, and Betrayal among the New York Intellectuals*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001.
Lowell, Robert. *Collected Poems*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003.
Middlebrook, Diane Wood. *Anne Sexton: A Biography*. London: Virago, 1991.
Morris, Daniel. *Lyric Encounters: Essays on American Poetry from Lazarus and Frost to Ortiz Cofer and Alexie*. London: Bloomsbury, 2013.
Online Etymology Dictionary. S.v. "celebrate." Accessed July 13, 2014. http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=celebrate&allowed_in_frame=0.
Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology. Compiled by T. C. Onions. S.v. "celebrate." Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966.
Parkinson, Thomas. *Poets, Poems, Movements*. Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1987.
Passin, Laura. "The Lyric in the Age of Theory: The Politics and Poetics of Confession in Contemporary American Poetry." PhD diss., Northwestern University, 2012.

Price, Deidre. "Confessional Poetry and Blog Culture in the Age of Autobiography." PhD diss., Florida State University, 2010.
Rasula, Jed. "~~The Age of~~ Lowell." In *The Critical Response to Robert Lowell*, edited by Steven Gould Axelrod, 283–88. Westport: Greenwood Press, 1999.
Righelato, Pat. *Understanding Rita Dove*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2006.
Rosenthal, M. L. "Poetry as Confession." *Nation*, no. 189 (1959): 154–55.
Sexton, Anne. *The Complete Poems*. Boston: Hougton Mifflin, 1981.
Stevens, Wallace. *Collected Poetry and Prose*. New York: Library of America, 1997.
Trethewey, Natasha. *Native Guard*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2007.
———. *Thrall*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2012.
Vendler, Helen. *Poems, Poets, Poetry*. Boston: Bedford Books, 1997.
Whitman, Walt. *Complete Poetry and Collected Prose*. New York: Library of America, 1982.