Confessing the body
Plath, Sexton, Berryman, Lowell, 
Ginsberg and the gendered poetics of the ‘real’

Elizabeth Gregory

I do it so it feels real.

Sylvia Plath, 'Lady Lazarus'

For the rats
have moved in, mostly, and this is for real.

John Berryman, 'Dream Song #7'

The profession of poetry came to prominence in the 1950s and 1960s in the work of Robert Lowell, Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath, John Berryman and Allen Ginsberg, and continues a force today in the work of such poets as Sharon Olds and Mark Doty. The mode transforms and comments upon the 'imperial' poetics of the modernists who immediately preceded the confessionalists. Developing their contrastingly 'personal' approach, the 1950s confessionalists utilized the methods of psychoanalysis and psychotherapy, which had recently gained wide acceptance in the US and with which they all had some experience. Their work has deeply influenced much poetry since, raising the possibility of moments of personal sharing in the work of poets in every mode. At the same time, it has been looked down upon, for being too 'real' — as an outpouring of unedited data from the world of experience (a view indicated in the frequent linkage of the adjective 'mere' with the noun 'confessionalism'). And it has been disparaged as too feminine. Though the mode first appeared in the work of male poets, it is often associated with its female practitioners, and condemned as trivial and self-indulgent (see Gammel, Travisano and Perkins for a range of readings of this perception). The two criticisms are not unrelated. This essay explores the connections between the work's 'reality' claims, its gendering and its depictions of the body — a nexus of concerns that I will argue are linked in a way that clarifies the operation of the mode overall.

The five poets I discuss here employ the confessional mode variously, but in ways that challenge dominant ideas about the operation of poetic authority. All challenge the basis of such authority in exclusionary hierarchies that link, and mark as secondary, the categories of the 'feminine', the
'real' and the 'body'. By laying claim to and affirming value in these 'secondary' terms, these poets move toward introducing alternative authority patterns that can admit new speakers talking about new material. All employ reference to their gender presentation in the world outside the poem to authorize their speech within it. These references are not synonymous with direct representation of their sexuality or their biography. But they do refer us to the ways in which gender positioning informs reception of work, while at the same time offering a means of engaging the historical gendering of the poetic family romance. And by pointing to the parallels between poetic representations of gender and those active in the world outside the poem, and to the ways in which the two realms have always interacted, they suggest new ways in which poetry can effect change in the way the world imagines authority.

Though the term confessional poetry has been current since M.L. Rosenthal introduced it in a review of Lowell's Life Studies in 1959, its definition and its usefulness have been much debated. Nevertheless the name has stuck, because it seems to capture something important about the poetry. To begin with a brief definition: confessional poetry draws on the poet's autobiography and is usually set in the first person. It makes a claim to forego personae and to represent an account of the poet's own feelings and circumstances, often by reference to names and scenarios linked to the poet. The work dwells on experiences generally prohibited expression by social convention: mental illness, intra-familial conflicts and resentments, childhood traumas, sexual transgressions and intimate feelings about one's body are its frequent concerns. The transgression involved in naming the forbidden gives rise to the term 'confession', which, via its religious, psychoanalytic and legal associations, summons up ideas of sin, mental breakdown and criminality.

The shock value inherent in such links plays an important part in the operation of this poetry, but defenders of the work have objected that the term focuses attention on these elements and obscures the poets' artistry and more subtle effects. Objections have also been made to the term's suggestion of an identity between poet and speaker - its perceived implication that the poet 'confesses' in the poems as s/he might to a priest or doctor. Clearly, though based on elements of the poet's life, such work cannot be restricted to literal retellings of events or 'true' emotions. As recent studies in autobiography confirm, some transformation must occur in the process of rendering any set of facts into narrative, poetic or not. Indeed, confession's reality claim is an extremely artful manipulation of the materials of poetry, not a departure from them. But it has confused some readers, who endorse the term for a special confessional 'truth'.

Thomas Travisano has made a case against the term, deeming it reductive and prejudicial (1999: 32-70). He builds on complaints made by some of the poets themselves. For instance, Berryman responded to being called confessional 'with rage and contempt' and later found it necessary to insist that the Dream Songs were 'essentially about an imaginary character (not the poet, not me), named Henry' (Travisano 1999: 32). Not all poets object - Sexton proudly spoke of herself as the 'only confessional poet' (Middlebrook 1991: 382). But to avoid the unwelcome associations, alternative names have developed, including 'personal', 'autobiographical' and 'self-exploratory' poetry. While acknowledging the difficulties raised by the term confessional poetry, I employ it here to explore those elements of the work, often transgressive, that the term illuminates.

Principal among the transgressions at issue in confessional work, I suggest, is its exploration of shifting gender scripts. Gender roles (and the intimately linked issue of sexual orientation) are among the few behaviors subject to discipline in all three of confession's pre-poetic domains: the church, the clinic and the court. Confession to homosexuality or to lack of interest in mothering a newborn, for instance, might be taken and judged in any of these venues. But focus on gender develops not only because the poets want to talk about their personal experience with it. The confessional stance importantly allows its rework their relation to the poetic tradition. The dynamics of this tradition have been patterned on a gendered, familial model - the poetic family romance described by Bloom (1973), which historically has followed a patriarchal model in which authority circulates among fathers and sons, and from which mothers and daughters are pointedly excluded. Confession to departures from received gender and family models offers a means to transform those dynamics or to explore what transformation might involve.

In one form or another, all of the poets named in the title challenge the established tradition by confessing themselves 'feminine'. Clearly such a claim will have different valences for self-presenting male and female poets, as well as for self-presenting heterosexuals and homosexuals (and I refer here to the way in which gender and sex are employed within the work as part of the authority claim of the poet). But all of these poets operate in tension with the long-operative Western view of femininity as a kind of sin in itself, calling forth shame. This view underlies the historical representation of femininity in poetry as a silent, sanitized body that serves as the topic of discussion by and among masculine speakers. For these speakers, femininity arouses both excitement and shame (quickly displaced onto the 'source' of the excitement) at the need the excitement reveals.

In invoking religious, legal and psychoanalytic frameworks, the term confessional poetry raises a question about the work: does it disclose secrets in order to repent of them, thus reinforcing the initial negative judgment that kept them secret (the religious or legal dynamic), or to declassify that judgment (the psychoanalytic dynamic)? In part, these poets' confessions to the 'sin' of femininity mean to redefine it positively; but their attempts, as will become clear below, meet with various results.

Along with its gender focus, confessional work puts into play a reality trope - the blurring of the border between reality and fiction such that it
seems as though poet and speaker are one. This trope is a variation on the sincerity claims that poets have long employed to convince readers that their work deserves attention. Inevitably both tropes involve much artful manoeuvring within the framework of speech presentations with which readers are familiar and comfortable. And inevitably this framework is gendered. In claiming to speak from the 'real' rather than just the sincere, confessional poets push against the boundaries of the poetic, claiming access to something more primal from which they claim authority. Julia Kristeva's concept of the 'True-Real' assists here in pointing to the nostalgic gesture implicit in references to 'reality' as if it were a place outside language and interpretation, when instead it is always informed by the linguistically based understanding of the perceiver. Kristeva links the 'True-Real' to the idea of the archaic mother, who inhabits a mythicalextra-linguistic space (1986: 235). In calling on the reality trope, confessional poets call upon the authority of such a mother, located in a space outside language, though within the paradoxical situation of the poet, whose material is the very language the archaic mother or the 'feminine' would seem to escape.

In addition, the reality trope, which contravenes the more standard poetic claim to an authority of imagination, raises questions about the role of reputation in poetic authority claims. Though it is a trope, this device points up the way that facts about poets (their 'characters' and whatever is known about their social positions) have long been part of the active penumbra of poetry, throwing shadows around the work that inform its reception. From Dylan Thomas and Marianne Moore to Sir Philip Sidney, John Milton and even Homer and Sappho, the public personae and frequently the celebrity of poets have shaped the way readers approach and absorb their work. Exactly how this happens, and how it changes over time as reputations evolve, varies and lies open to dispute. But confessional work brings the issue to the fore.

The mode remains popular with poets and readers, as the careers of Lucile Clifton, Mark Doty, Rita Dove, Tony Hoagland, Marilyn Hacker, Sharon Olds and C.K. Williams, among many others, attest. Confession may draw readers not only through its invocation of a pre-linguistic real, but also because it reveals the constructedness of life-scripts generally. The arbitrariness of our 'selves' presages the possibility that the 'real' world might be remade otherwise and that its claims to permanence and stability are themselves fictional. Alternatively, it may attract because it allows us to connect with 'selves' we recognize as similar. Whatever its appeal, the mode has power and over the past fifty years has demonstrated a robust adaptability.

Initial evidence of this adaptability came early, when male and female poets employed the confessional mode to quite different effect from the start. But both began from a shared premise, which linked 'femininity' with 'reality', via the traditional and still active gender division that links men to the world of imagination and ideas and women to the world of the body and, by analogy, I argue, the 'merely' factual - that which is apparently untransformed by imagination. Confessional poetry developed as a trans-

formative adoption of this view of feminine creativity - defined as realistic, literal, physical or untranscendent. Masculine creativity, by contrast, in this model includes imaginative, literary, mental or innovative work.

For female poets, the move into confessionalism involves finesse in the literalism to which they had been confined into a position of poetic strength. Confessional poetry crosses the line from literal into literary: moving biographical material formerly associated with non-literary prose into the poetic realm and claiming for it a new 'feminine' authority of the 'real'. Sexton and Plath figure this transition in their images of female physicality and literal (pro)creativity within the new context of literary creation. More than a third of Plath's mature poems involve some baby imagery, and nearly a quarter take babies or pregnancy as a major subject or principal metaphor. Sexton too employs the female body and its productivity as a consistent emblem in her negotiation of her status as poet. These images are linked to confessions to illness, which also involve a gendered confession of embodiedness, and in the case of mental illness, a pointed blurring of mind/body distinctions. When writing about such material is demonstrated to take nerve and imagination, it develops a new affect. The segue of 'feminine' material into the 'masculine' poetic realm offered these female poets a path into the formerly forbidden zone.

For male poets of the 1950s, this 'feminine' position served as a figure for their sense of their 'secondary' position as heirs of the dauntingly successful modernists. Confession's ordinarily unauthoritative personal pose paradoxically offered authority, in its differentiation of confessional work from that of the 'impeccable' modernists. The originality of the new work gave it new value. By embracing the 'feminine' confessional position, these poets aimed to revalue the secondariness associated with it and by analogy the secondariness of their own post-modern position. The effort was to win authority for themselves, but the process threatened the hierarchies out of which authority and status have long sprung. Hence the work of some confessors betrays ambivalence about the full embrace of the signifiers of secondariness. This dynamic carries forward an inheritance from the modernists (who themselves struggled against feelings of secondariness, to the Romantics, which they too addressed through gendered structural innovation). As we will see, I read Berryman's first-person rendering of childbirth in 'Homage to Mistress Bradstreet' as an engagement with the authority questions at stake for male poets who take up the 'feminine' confessional mode.

The process of poetic positioning is differently inflected for self-presenting homosexual poets of both sexes, since they challenge received definitions of 'feminine' and 'masculine'. The transgressive confession to femininity that animates the work of all the confessionalists is represented in the work of poets who 'confess' homosexuality in scandalous demonstrations of love and respect for the body, which comes to mean differently outside the traditional gender hierarchy of the mind/body binary. In these poems, men admit to having bodies and to loving them, and women see their bodies as valuable
outside their service to men. These poets' wrenching round of attitudes toward traditional gender assumptions is aided by the confessional mode and its troping of the literal world of the body through references to literal facts.

In moving to admit 'feminine' speech to the poetic realm, male and female confessional poets of all orientations engage the realm of the 'real', and particularly the body - the clearest emblem thereof. In the course of confessing to having bodies, these poets reflect upon how those bodies define their writing. In this work the body begins to speak about its own experience and to refuse the mind/body distinction, revealing the two to be mutually constitutive. While ostensibly the site in which firm identity (the 'truth' about oneself) is asserted, confession turns out to be a place in which received definitions of gender, of family roles, of the mind/body relation, and of poetry are submitted to scrutiny and become blurred.

**Plath and Sexton**

Both Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton draw particular attention in their poetry to female bodies and to the physical aspects of womanhood, conventionally considered inappropriate not only to poetry but to public discourse generally. In so doing, both invite readers to notice that they, the poets, are women. They write poems about childbirth, pregnancy, miscarriages, abortions and menstruation. These have been read as experience narratives, not unlike other biographical details included in confessional poetry. But these particular details are pivotal metaphors for the operation of confessional poetry overall, which draws to speak of the nexus of physical, emotional and personal relations that has long been understood as woman's province. As Steven Gould Axelrod notes of Plath, 'whereas female as well as male tradition has generally opposed motherhood to literary creation, [she] sought to associate them' (1990: 146). The same may be said of Sexton. In flaunting the daily elements of women's ordinary physical lives, these poets trouble the boundaries of the poetic gender map. Such troubling revalues the active (as opposed to the objectified) female body positively; it demonstrates that women have minds; and it implies that men have bodies.

While at one level their poems call upon the authority of an archaic mother in invoking the 'real' world of the pre-linguistic body, the call is complicated by awareness of the fact that historical bias against women speakers largely precludes appeal to such alternative authority. The evidence of the linguistic caniness of all the speakers (female and male) who employ this trope further tangles the story. While no more insincere than any other poetic authority claim, this work ironizes its authority claims even as it plays upon them, raising questions about the operation of authority overall. The work also points up the ways in which the bodies of the speakers are constructed through their place in the social/cultural nexus (since, for example, women are not any more embodied than men, though the culture interprets them as though they were).

Sexton's poem 'Those Times' tells of a girl-child reduced to and blamed for her body, who imagines and accomplishes a transformation of her relation to that body. In the poem, antecedent to much of Sharon Olds's work, the speaker's mother humiliates her with nightly bodily inspections (a 'bedtime ritual / where, on the cold bathroom tiles, I was spread out daily'). The daughter spends the days in a closet, 'avoiding myself, / my body, the suspect' waiting to grow up and away. The mother, co-opted by her oppressors, betrays her own femininity in punishing the daughter's. But the daughter imagines things otherwise, laying 'such plans of flight, / believing I would take my body into the sky, / dragging it with me like a large bed'. At the close she redeems her femininity positively, expressing awe at her own creative capacity (her monthly periods are likened to the blooming of an exotic flower), and astonishment that:

...children,

two monuments,

would break from between my legs,

two cramped girls breathing carelessly

Where the speaker had been confined to a closet, these children break free from a cramped space - not just the womb, we can infer, but the limitations that their mother faced in childhood. The speaker breaks free too, achieving the transcendence she'd dreamed of - not a transcendence of the body (she will drag the body into the sky), but a transcendence of the choice between body and mind. The poem closes with an assertion of insight and of the speaker's capacity, acquired as a child, to 'hear / the unsaid more clearly' that is the prelude to this poem (1981: 118–21). The speaker's childhood experience teaches her to recognize and redefine the power dynamics of the world she grows into, though not to escape them entirely. The poem concerns itself with the body and its productions, but in itself it offers evidence of the speaker's ability to produce in other realms as well.

The allusions to the speaker's authorship of the poem suggest that the poet and the speaker are one and bring us back to the issue of confession's reality claims. This is re-enforced by references to the speaker's two daughters (a biographical fact) and a problematic 'Mother', familiar from earlier biographically-based poems. The poem that immediately follows in *Live or Die*, 'Two Sons', treats similar material (maternal/child relations and the physical production of children, this time through food and lessons) but in a pointedly non-biographical context. Though the lonely bitterness portrayed here as the emotions of a mother whose children have married and moved on might apply to the mothers of daughters as well, or to one who imagines such a departure, the apposition reminds us not to assume an exact co-occurrence between Sexton's work and her life. 'In poetry', Sexton was fond of saying, 'truth is a lie is a truth' - a fine synopsis of the reality trope.

Plath's poems frequently link literary and physical creativity. Morning
Song’, the opening poem of Arild, celebrates the arrival of a baby in terms that analogize the infant and the volume she appears in: ‘Love set you going like a fat gold watch. / The midwife slapped your footsoles, and your bald cry / Told its place among the elements’ (1981: 156). The poem’s bald cry and the baby’s enter in tandem, calling the reader’s attention to the poet’s ability to operate in both realms. Likewise, the poem’s conclusion links the child’s cry with the poems that follow: ‘And now you cry / Your handful of notes / The clear vowels rise like balloons’ (1981: 157). Sexton creates a like linkage in ‘In Celebration of My Uterus’.

But the lives on display in the poems are not portraits of pure physical contentment. Instead they tell tales of babies who bring just as much pain as they do joy, and of parents who terrorize their offspring eternally in memory. Sexton’s poem ‘The Death Baby’ for example, asserts multiple links between the speaker’s own childhood, her mothering, her poetry and her longing for an end. In Plath’s ‘Tulips’, babies enter not as characters but as similes, the threatening flowers ‘breathe / Lightly, though their white swaddlings, like an awful baby’ (1981: 161). In her ‘Stopped Dead’ a metaphoric baby’s cry (‘a goddam baby screaming off somewhere’) haunts the poisoned atmosphere around a couple on vacation. ‘There’s always a bloody baby in the air, / I’d call it a sunset, but / Whoever heard a sunset yowl like that?’ (1981: 230). The baby takes a place like that of sunsets and natural description in the poet’s palette. It is a new trope to be employed to various effect.

From before the time she became pregnant, Plath looked forward to the poetic material pregnancy would provide. In a journal entry she anticipates, ‘Maybe some good pregnant poems, if I know I really am’ (2000: 474). She seems to plan here to be her own muse, at the same time that she indicates that she assumes that reality (knowing she’s pregnant) authenticates confessional work. But the fact that they were planned in advance complicates any view of them as ad hoc response to experience. Plath’s ‘You’re’, written two months before the birth of her first child, portrays a growing focusus, as does Sexton’s ‘Little Girl, My Stringbean, My Lovely Woman’ written much after the birth. Both convey, arguably, no special mother’s knowledge. They do bespeak, however, a special attentiveness to the experience of pregnancy that had rarely been paid in poetry – an attentiveness born both of experience and of the knowledge that this material could supply not just good images, but a powerful new field of poetry. ‘Little Girl’ works to imagine a better world for the daughter, a world in which the body does not shame.

Plath’s and Sexton’s poems about suicide and death also use the reality trope to claim the authority of documented bodily experience. Again the material has particularly feminine resonance. The poetry of suicide, especially failed suicide, engages the familiar poetic reduction of the female to the silent body (via the blazon, for example, which itemizes favourite parts of the beloved’s body) or the ‘merely’ real. But this work refunctions the poetic female suicide, turning it from evidence of a feminine inability to speak into material female poets can speak about: think of ‘Lady Lazarus’, with its insistence that its artful suicides ‘feel’ real but are not, and its triumphant resurgence at the close (1981: 244–7). Its tale of repeated and ongoing attempts (a total of nine are predicted) promises a long progression of poems on the line between the real and the ficted. She foresees herself writing still at ninety, mining a rich vein of poetic material. Sexton’s ‘Suicide Note’ similarly discusses multiple deaths.

Both figures are akin to those invoked in Sexton’s anthem ‘Her Kind’: ‘possessed witch[es]’ who are ‘not ashamed to die’ (1981: 16). At the same time that it speaks of a willingness to consider suicide, Sexton’s phrase also indicates a more general willingness to be public about things the culture usually shames its members into silence about. Their kind do not die of shame; instead they contest the rule of shame that has enforced the age-old silence about female experience and about the life of the body at the same time that they dispute its limitation to that subject. Rather than being possessed by special occult powers of femininity, both ‘witches’ might be said to be possessed of a special access to poetic authority in opening up the repressed (occulted) feminine to public view.

In the real world, of course, both poets did succeed at suicide eventually, further blurring the literary/literal line. And while their deaths have contributed to their renown, it is also arguable that these have distracted readers and critical attention from the poetry’s artfulness. The paradox is that in their examination of the ‘real’ as experienced by the gendered subject, Sexton and Plath lay themselves open to familiar judgements that reduce women to bodies, revel in evidence of their being unable to control those bodies, and at the same time condemn them for breaking out of the lockstep of marital chastity (evidenced in the poems both in descriptions of extramarital encounters and in the fact of describing the body publicly, arguably a form of unchastity). So while confession may offer a way out of old orders, that way also risks becoming a route back in.

Berryman and Lowell

In their confessional work, both John Berryman and Robert Lowell invoke the body through reference to mental illness and, in Berryman’s case, suicide. But they are much less direct in their discussions of the body’s functions than Plath and Sexton. In part, this is because the analogy to poetry works less well with the male body, which does not visibly bear, and in part, because both feel anxiety over strong identification with ‘feminine’ territory, which paradoxically includes the male body. Instead of presenting intimate details about male physical experience, both poets speak of the body by becoming ventriloquists – using the voices of others, variously and vicariously, and acknowledging their own ‘femininity’ at a remove.

Berryman does this most obviously in his ‘Homage to Mistress Bradstreet’ which he opens with a stanza wherein his speaker ‘self’ invokes Bradstreet: ‘Out of maize & air / your body’s made, and moves. I summon, see’,
and then assumes her perspective 'I come to stay with you, / and the Governor, & Father, & Simon, & the huddled men' (1968: 11, 12). In the next line Bradstreet begins: 'By the week we landed we were, most, used up'. The ventriloquist effect, in which Berryman seems to be possessed by Bradstreet, straddles the line between personal confession and the persona poem.

The effect reminds us that all poets working in the confessional mode, including Plath and Sexton, might be said to ventriloque aspects of themselves in their work, since all confessional work involves creation of a persona, fitted for the purposes of the poem, though sharing the name and elements of the biography of the poet. Berryman's Dream Songs are generally viewed as confessional because they point to a connection between the poem's emotional dynamics and the poet's biography. But the songs employ a very complex speaker, who sometimes seems to represent the poet and at other times is very clearly a character named Henry, who speaks from aspects of the poet's experience within a minstrel show framework that marks him as a ventriloquist's dummy.' Lowell suggests the blurriness of the lines here: 'The poems are about Berryman, or rather are about a person he calls Henry. Henry is Berryman seen as himself, as poète maudit, child and puppet' (1987: 108).

In 'Homage to Mistress Bradstreet', Berryman takes the opportunity to narrate a childbirth in the first person:

So squeezed, since you I scream? I love you & hate
off with you. Ages! Useless. Below my waist
he has me in Hell's wise
[...]
Monster you are killing me Be sure
I'll have you later Women do endure
I can not no longer
and it passes the wretched trap whelming and I am me
drencht & powerful, I did it with my body!

(1968: 17)

This account emphasizes shame in physical function ('shame I am voiding oh behind it is too late'), but also includes pride in physical accomplishment ('I did it with my body!'). Though the poem does not fit the standard confessional model, Berryman described the process of writing the poem as a couvade (Simpson 1982: 226), and there are good reasons to view the poem as speaking to Berryman's own poetic concerns in a manner verging on the confessional. The poem may be seen as his transition into confession, since he began writing his confessional Dream Songs very shortly after.

For Berryman the contrast created by this adoption of a birth-giving female poetic persona opens up the door to reflection on the genderedness of poetry by men and the limitations that masculinity involves. But such reflection is not the only purpose, especially since it imports a substantial risk of loss of status. As noted earlier, male confessional poets of the 1950s utilize the mode to assist in the ongoing intergenerational struggle for poetic originality. Reviewing a collection of essays on Eliot in 1948, Berryman anticipated the preemption of Eliot's 'pervasive and valuable doctrine' of poetic impersonality by the dynamic of his own future work: 'Perhaps in the end this poetry which the commentators are so eager to prove impersonal will prove to be personal, and will also appear then more terrible and more pitiful even than it does now' (Haffenden 1982: 206). Twenty years later, in his acceptance speech for the National Book Award, he spoke even more directly of the intergenerational antithesis:

It is no good looking for models. We want anti-models. I set up the Bradstreet poem as an attack on The Waste Land: personality, and plot — no anthropology, no Tarot pack, no Wagner. I set up The Dream Songs as hostile to every visible tendency in both American and English poetry ... The aim was the same in both poems: the reproduction or invention of the motions of a human personality, free and determined, in one case feminine, in the other masculine.

(Haffenden 1982: 352)

The Waste Land here stands in for modernist work generally. The takeover of Bradstreet's voice figures well the dream of postmodern priority, since Bradstreet is regarded, gender notwithstanding, as the first American poet.

But gender remains crucial: the choice of this foremother speaks also to the special concerns of Berryman's generation, who were troubled by both a perceived 'effeminization' of poetry in the wider cultural scene (a longstanding concern, itself the source of the militancy of the emphatically masculine male modernists) and an effective effeminacy associated with the secondary status of being merely postmodern. Bradstreet doubles Berryman, J.M. Linebarger notes, in that both wrote at times when poetry was deemed (by some) inappropriate to their gender (Beney 1993: 164–5). In addition, like the female confessional poets, Berryman here claims access to poetic power via the analogy of literal (pro) creativity with that of literary creativity that the birth scene provides. The identification with Bradstreet is partial, though. To insist upon the finessing of the literal aspect of their link, Berryman makes a point of disparaging Bradstreet's literary efforts (all this bald abstract didacticism I read appalled; the proportioned, spiritless poems accumulate') (1968: 14, 24). In so doing, he also affirms his continued masculinity through contrast of his 'better' poetry with hers, signalling his continued anxiety about identification with Bradstreet's gender and distinguishing himself from it at the same time that he puts it to use.

This reading of Berryman's portrait of Bradstreet is supported by reference to a later directly confessional Berryman poem, 'Two Organs'. The poem begins with a reminiscence about a college philosophy lesson taught by Irwin
Edman at Columbia: 'I remind myself at that time of Plato's uterus – / an animal passively longing for children' which wanders through the body if denied them. Berryman goes on to connect the two creativities: 'For “children” read: big fat fresh original & characteristic poems. // My longing yes was a woman’s (1970: 16). Upon this advice, the poet turns (almost) to his own body, which he 'undresses' through the mediation of an ‘unworldly’ European friend, whom he describes shouting as he pees while fishing, 'I wish my penis was big enough for this whole lake! My phantasy precisely at twenty', the speaker affirms (1970: 17). Mention of a uterus (even Plato's) opens the way both to the male speaker’s acknowledgement that he has a feminine (‘a woman’s’) aspect and finally to his confession to having a body. Though virility is the topic of discussion, it is not reinforced in the description. The poem’s contrast of wish and reality risks seeming ridiculous at the close, on purpose to examine the ways in which fantasy and the body, the imaginary and the real, masculinity and femininity are always interactive. The ridiculous effect isfallon from the unfamiliarity of looking at the male body outside the protective fantasies in which it is so often shrouded. Berryman, as confessional poet, risks seeming ridiculous, here and elsewhere, in order to establish an authority of the secondary of which he may partake. The operation of this authority through evaluation of the linked domains of the real, the feminine and the body, is nearly represented here.

Robert Lowell’s ‘Words for Hart Crane’ takes a different approach to establishment of an authority of the secondary, but with correspondent effect. Lowell’sLife Studies (1959) was his first volume to include confessional work, along with other material. The ‘life studies’ in this new book include numerous portraits of family members in moments of crisis, and ‘confessions’ of such personal difficulties as marital trouble and intermittent madness.

Among the confessionalists Lowell holds a peculiar position. Because his prominent New England family tree includes the poets James Russell Lowell and Amy Lowell, his family stories might be understood already to be part of the public realm, as Elizabeth Bishop suggested in a 1957 letter to Lowell (1994: 351). As such, the status of the ‘real’ material he can reveal is particularly questionable because it is already (‘really’) poetic. Lowell’s work blurs the line between the real and the artistic particularly thoroughly. He invokes this family history insistently, talking as much about other members of his family as about himself. In addition he talks much about and through other poets (speaking for them in the loose translations ofimitations) and about historical figures (inHistory).

‘Words for Hart Crane’ appears at the end of the third part ofLife Studies, directly preceding the ‘Life Studies’ section, in which the poems for which Rosenthal would coin the term ‘confessional’ appear. It is a persona poem; but one particularly well situated to raise questions about the relation of confessional work and persona poetry generally. An unusual elegy, set in the first person and in quotation marks, it differs from the form of the other three elegies in Part Three, all of which, more traditionally, are spoken by a narrator about the individual there mourned, who is addressed in the second person. The punning title lets us know that these words are both written for Crane as an elegy, and written for his ghost to speak, as a kind of monologue.

The monologue he speaks is confessional in that the speaker, ‘Crane’, declares his homosexuality explicitly. He admits to ‘talking sailors’ and links his poetic lineage to his homosexuality: ‘1. / Catullus rudio [..] used to play my role // of homosexual’ (1967: 55). This confessional effect is reinforced by the use of quotation marks at the start and end. While these may be read as dialogue markers, they also suggest a direct borrowing from the text of a personal statement, particularly coming so near to the poems that follow in Part Four. Lowell invokes a line of homosexual poets quite specifically in this poem – Whitman, Catullus and Crane. Shelley, of fluid sexuality, appears at the close, as part of an apparent invitation to the reader (explicitly male: ‘Who asks for me, the Shelley of my age, / must lay his heart out for my bed and board’ (1967: 55)) into a kind of sexual relation with the speaker. The tradition of the elegy, in which the present poet lends a prior one and in the process demonstrates his own skill and lays claim to his predecessor’s authority, sets Lowell at the end of this line. This move turns the poem into Lowell’s own confession after all – not of literal homosexuality but of something akin to a literary homosexuality; that is, to speaking in the confessional poems that follow this one (as he follows Crane) from what might be called a feminized position, or at any rate a position that renders sexuality and gender role claims complex. By introducing the new work through a feminized speaker, Lowell points both to the situation in poetic history he feels himself to be in and to some ambivalence about his enterprise. Both the situation and the ambivalence are marked by a degree of blurriness in the gender identification of the poet (insofar as he is invoked as a character in the poem via the elegiac format), which may speak to a related blurriness about the status of the identity of the poet in the confessional poem. (We get more evidence of flexible sexuality in ‘Skunk Hour’, wherein the ‘fairy decorator’ thinks of giving up his unprofitable shop and marrying (1967: 89).) The use of quotation marks along with the first person pronoun in ‘Words for Hart Crane’ allows Lowell to at once identify himself with and separate himself from the Crane character he creates. As with Berryman’s variously feminized heterosexual men, the gay man here stands for in the male American, postmodern poet who seeks to revalue his secondary position positively.

Ginsberg

Homosexuality as trope gets different but related inflection in the work of Allen Ginsberg, whoseHowl (1956) may be said to be the first directly confessional poem. Unlike Lowell, Ginsberg’s claims to a blurred gender status
within the poetic family romance are echoed in his biography. In *Howl* he
talks about gay sex and about being crazy and writes of 'confessing out the
soul ... with the absolute heart of the poem of life butchered out of their
own bodies' (1988: 131). Ginsberg's presentations of the body and of his
own 'feminine' status (as a man who offers himself as a love object to other
men) trope and reinforce the reality claims that the poem makes via its coinci-
dences with his biography.

But his biography itself already had a literary history, courtesy of
William Carlos Williams, who had literarized Ginsberg's 'reality' in *Paterson.*
There he quoted Ginsberg's letters and effectively claimed to be Gins-
berg's 'true' (poetic) father, ousting his biographical father, another, less
successful poet.8 Though the confessionalists define themselves through con-
trast with the modernists, the modernists were not as patently impersonal
or monolithic as summary statements suggest. Williams had already
attempted in *Paterson* a revolt against the insistently masculine authority
claims of T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land,* through a dynamic of feminization
with proto-confessional elements. Williams begins by destabilizing the
Father/Son dynamic of poetic inheritance that his poem's title invokes.
In place of a male poetic heir, he chooses a female, the little-known Maria
Nardi, whose letters to him requesting mentorship and support he cites
extensively in Books 1 and 2. In these letters, the ventriloquized Nardi 'confesses' herself a woman poet, struggling in unfair circumstances. In
choosing a daughter, Williams embraces femininity and asserts value
therein, to revalue the secondary ranking he perceives to accrue to Amer-
ican modernist poets (as opposed to 'European' poets like Eliot and Pound).
As the poem progresses, however, the risks of association with a female heir
become too great for Williams, and in Books 4 and 5 he introduces Gins-
berg as a safer substitute — feminized but still masculine too.9 In speaking
personally in his own poetry, Ginsberg continues the role Williams cast
him in.

Ginsberg fills his work with celebrations of the male body and of sex
('whole mountains of homosexuality, Matterhorns of cock, Grand Canyons of
asshole' (1988: 214)) in ways that hardly sound 'feminine,' but that in the
terms of the divisions discussed here are just that. He addresses this issue in
*Kaddish,* an elegy for his mother which is not quite ventriloquist but
which does 'confess' both Naomi Ginsberg and himself and connects them
intimately. Though she is portrayed in madness and extremity, the portrait
does not condemn. Three lines in, Ginsberg refers us to 'Adonis' last tri-
umphant stanzas, making Naomi the Keats to his Shelley. He recounts
what he knows of her life — including a late night bus trip to a rest-home
after a mental breakdown, told from the perspective of his twelve-year-old
self accompanying her, and the story of her return to the family, years later,
with many details of her difficulties. Through 'release of these' particulars
(the facts of daily life) he aims to 'illuminate mankind'. In so doing he
borrows from her, whose mad visions he recognizes as a source of his own
poetics: 'mad as you' — (sanity a trick of agreement)' (212). He reports her
vision of meeting God at his 'cheap cabin in the country' (219), full of
details and homely responses to crisis:

I cooked supper for him. I made him a nice supper — lentil soup,
vegetables, bread & butter — milk — he sat down at the table and ate, he
was sad.

I told him, Look at all these fightings and killings down there,
What's the matter? Why don't you put a stop to it?

Further on Ginsberg offers details of her ordinary body — which turns out to
carry records of many ordinary dramas, presented within the framing drama
of his own current Oedipal imaginings:

One time I thought she was trying to make me come lay her — flirting
to herself at sink — lay back on huge bed that filled most of the room,
dress up around her hips, big slash of hair, scars of operations ... I was
cold — later revolted a little, not much — seemed perhaps a good idea to
try — know the Monster of the Beginning Womb — Perhaps — that way.
Would she care? She needs a lover.

(Ginsberg 1988: 219)

Naomi's ordinary body becomes monstrous in this description — not only in
its details but in the undiscriminating desire her son attributes to it
('Would she care?'). The attribution being his creation, we can read the
scene as reflective of his own highly ambivalent take on his 'feminine'
role. Throughout this poem Ginsberg plays against gender expectations, tying
himself to the 'feminine' body, and to the 'real' details of his mother's life,
which he shapes to fit the literary frame and to employ as part of his own
(Shelleyan) move to reform the networks of literary authority to admit him
and a whole new range of ordinary material for which he claims significance.
But, again following Williams, after first claiming the alternative authority
of the 'feminine' — thickened here through its ties to the 'real' and the 'body'
— Ginsberg goes on in the Monster passage to distance himself somewhat
from the riskiness that linkage entails. But he remains at risk, nonetheless.

All five of the poets discussed here employ the confessional mode to open
up discussion of the power dynamics of poetry and the society it reflects and
addresses. Gender politics supply the entree to a range of linked issues of
power. While these poets do not resolve the issues, they illuminate them
brilliantly and expand the available options for speech. The relation between
the different poets' self-presentsions itself offers important evidence of the
discourse among them.
Notes

1. The mode extends the first-person lyric mode, long the domain of male speakers, who employ it to establish a 'sincerity' claim that paves the way for the 'reality' claim of the confessors. See, for instance, Forbes (2004).

2. Although Gammel writes about prose and popular media, her analyses of the gendering of confession speak to the poetic experience as well. Travisano's work enacts the trivialization, and Perkins provides a historical framework for understanding it.

3. See Homans's (1986: 1-39) tracking of this division from Horeb through Laca. Laca, Plath explores the topic in 'Magi'.


5. Space limits prevent treatment of the work of a self-presenting lesbian poet here, but Bishop, Rich and Hacker offer rich and various examples.


8. Rosenthal coined the term in 1959 in reviewing Lowell's Life Studies, but his technique was influenced by W. D. Snodgrass, Sexton, Plath and others. Ginsberg's text predated Lowell's and fits the description offered in the second paragraph of this essay. Phillips omits Ginsberg from his Confessional Poets not because he doesn't consider his work confessional, but because he doesn't find it sufficiently poetic.

9. While all biography is necessarily textual, Ginsberg's experience as the 'real' subject of another poet's work informs his expansion on this precedent in Hotel.


Bibliography


Modern Confessional Writing
New critical essays

Edited by Jo Gill
Contents

Contributors vii
Acknowledgements ix

Introduction 1

1 Dangerous confessions: the problem of reading Sylvia Plath biographically 11
   TRACY BRAIN

2 Confessing the body: Plath, Sexton, Berryman, Lowell, Ginsberg and the gendered poetics of the 'real' 33
   ELIZABETH GREGORY

3 'To feel with a human stranger': Adrienne Rich's post-Holocaust confession and the limits of identification 50
   ANN KENISTON

4 'Your story. My story': confessional writing and the case of Birthday Letters 67
   JO GILL

5 Bridget Jones's Diary: confessing post-feminism 84
   LEAH GUENTHER

6 'The memoir as self-destruction': A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius 100
   BRAN NICOL
### Contents

7 Truth, confession and the post-apartheid black consciousness in Njabulo Ndebele's *The Cry of Winnie Mandela*
   YIANNI LIATSOI

8 Personal performance: the resistant confessions of Bobby Baker
   DEIRDRÉ HEDDON

9 Death sentences: confessions of living with dying in narratives of terminal illness
   RUTH ROBBINS

10 Cultures of confession/cultures of testimony: turning the subject inside out
    SUSANNAH RADSTONE

11 How we confess now: reading the Abu Ghraib archive
    LEIGH GILMORE

Index

---

### Contributors

Tracy Brain is Senior Lecturer in English and Creative Studies at Bath Spa University College. She is the author of *The Other Sylvia Plath* (2001).

Jo Gill is Lecturer in American Literature at Bath Spa University College. She is the editor of the *Cambridge Companion to Sylvia Plath* (2005) and has published articles on Anne Sexton, Ted Hughes and the contemporary confessional memoir.

Leigh Gilmore is a visiting professor of Women's Studies at the University of California, Berkeley. She is the author of *Autobiographies: A Feminist Theory of Women's Self-Representation* (1994) and *The Limits of Autobiography: Trauma and Testimony* (2001). She is completing a book on privacy, self-representation and global publics.

Elizabeth Gregory is an associate professor of English and Director of Women's Studies at the University of Houston. She is the author of *Quotation and Modern American Poetry: Imaginary Gardens with Real Toads* (1996) and is at work on a manuscript entitled *Why Tell?: Situating the Confessional Mode in Twentieth-Century Poetry.*

Leah Guenther is a doctoral candidate at Northwestern University. She has published articles on English Renaissance rhetoric and Shakespearean film. She is currently working on a project studying figures of headship in English Renaissance politics and drama.
