

## **The Poetics of the Personal 'I': Confessional Voice in Selected American Modernist Poems**

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### **Abstract**

The second half of the twentieth century witnessed the rise of a poetic tendency to self-expression, confessional poetry. Three different phenomena initiated this poetry: Civil Rights Movement, western social activism, and pathologisation of homosexuality. They have led to an intense reaction to the adopted system of sexual relationships, i.e. heteronormativity. Confessional poetry incarnates this reaction. This research tackles the poetics of the 'I' in the confessional poetry of Allen Ginsberg, Frank O'Hara, and Robert Lowell. Their selected poems reflect their secrets, psychological conflicts, and implicit rejection of their unfortunate political reality. The most important result of this research is that the reading of the poetry of these poets cannot be done but in a historicized context.

**Keywords:** Pathologisation; Civil Rights Movement; Confession; Confessional poetry; value-free technician

### **Introduction**

Confessional poetry is one of the Sapphic tendencies in modernist literature. It manifests the poet's psychological world through uncovering the hidden side of his life. It discloses his secrets and hidden repressed desires through the confessional act. Robert Phillips asserts that the faith-based poet places very few "barriers between his self and direct expression of that self (*The Confessional Poets* 8). Confessional poetry admits wrongdoing, unconventional, suicidal, sadistic, masochistic, disastrous thoughts, which shock and mutilate our culturally received senses. The taboo state of nakedness is embraced by many poets. Confessional poetry is one of the poetic trends in modernist literature. Confessional poets tread the thin line between producing free texts that emerge out of their private lives, and the need to maintain a level of secrecy about their being.

Many writers in the Fifties, not just by the naturally promiscuous Beats, but also by the very proper Robert Lowell and the pure and lyrical Louise Gleick. In fact, this nakedness extends beyond the body and stretches itself across the form of the poetry itself, presenting the reader with a starkness which contrasts the clandestine government operations and suppression of artistic freedom characterising the McCarthy era. Confessional poetry necessitates the baring of the poet's naked self. Vulnerability, in this instance, is also self-assertion.

Most critics of the poetry adhere to A. R. Jones's definition of the confessional voice: "the persona is naked ego involved in a very personal world and with particular private experience" (694). Although this outlook is fraught with theoretical roadblocks (such as a balanced equation of the poetic persona with the poet's self), the conceptual nakedness itself is a familiar concept conceived in confessional poetry as to warrant further examination.

The paper intends to examine the interplay of the public/private dichotomy, and the subversion of this distinction, in the writings of the Beat poet Allen Ginsberg, the City poet Frank O'Hara, and the upper-crust public poet Robert Lowell.

### **New Circumstance**

The academic coefficient of America's post-War consumerism could be found in the sudden influx of New Critical and New Formalist aficionados of the nation's universities. These "value-free technicians" of literary production came to represent the commoditization of literature (Boone 67). Scholarly publications and literary work now possessed not integrity but rather became more products that subscribe to market demands. It is this realisation that drove Robert Lowell to move away from his New Critical roots and write more intimate, "raw" poetry.

In a capitalist economy, where the proletariat strives towards social and economic mobility, the working-class is no longer the only subject of oppression. Those who now occupy the space of the downtrodden - such as women, African Americans, queer folk - belong to all classes and are perpetual underdogs as Robert Duncan, in his essay "The Homosexual in Society," puts it as follows:

For some, there are only the tribe and its covenant that are good, and all of mankind outside and their ways are evil; for many in America today good is progressive, their professional status determines their idea of "man" and to be genuinely respectable their highest concept of a good "person"—all other men are primitive, immature, or uneducated. (*Politics*)

### **Female Confessional Poetry**

Just as the women's struggle in the political arena varies from that of men, female confessional poetry to has a different purpose. Sandra Gilbert in *My Name is Darkness: The Poetry of Self-Definition* states that the male confessional poet "writes in the certainty that he is the inheritor of major traditions, the grandson of history" while his female counterpart "writes in the hope of discovering or defining a self (446). While the man may feel liberated in his skin, the women's body bespeaks shame and illusion.

Revolutions of their times, what these writers aim to do is to awaken society from the waking stupor that it is in, to recall attention towards heteronormativity, patriarchy, and consumerism, and the language which sustains and allows it; perhaps the writing itself is a process of self-awakening. The study explores the different ways in which each of these poets uses subversive rhetoric to communicate their nakedness, as well as their employed methods to navigate the public space of the text and private area of their lives.

Foucault, in *The History of Sexuality*, dates the modern-day idea of honest confession (or confessing to arrive at the truth) to the Christian confessional which, he states, was the examination chamber of "sinful" sexual desires. This indicates very early evidence of discussion (albeit closed) on the subject of sexuality; without naming it, all the effects and ramifications of sex are explored within the space of the confession chamber. The limitations placed about such discussions do not negate their existence. Through the narration of all thought and feeling as they pertain to sex, these confessions link much of the self to relations.

### **Ginsberg's Beat Body**

The manner of self-examination suggested in *Ginsberg's Beat Body* poem anticipates psychoanalysis as early as 1730. This opens up a new way of explaining the emergence of the field,

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**Language in India** [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com) ISSN 1930-2940 18:7 July 2018

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which is generally taken to be the result of repression (mainly sexual) in the Victorian era. In the Twentieth Century, the confessional concept was replaced by the therapist's couch, and deviant sexualities were to be cured by talking about them. Beat poetry came at a time when homosexuals were being hospitalised to be "cured" of their gayness. Even today, we are not past attempting to convert deviants back to "normality."

The scientific investigation into sex has not been freed. The pathologisation of homosexuality led to a reverse discourse that concluded that homosexuality is a natural "essence" of being. The discourse of gay sex is saturated by the insistence on its naturalness - its greatest premise (and what makes homophobia most repellent) is that one is "born this way." These relations are not, then, "contrary to nature" or "abominable." This proves Foucault's point about the inherent resistance that presents itself alongside every occurrence of power. Sexuality, is not, in fact, essential at all, but instead, as Foucault seeks to prove, a social construct shaped by various institutions and discourses. In short, sexuality is not just pure biological drive, but instead made up of multiple exercises of power in society. Foucault's argues that homosexuality and the homosexual are not discoveries; they are the products of multifaceted dialectics. In this way, Foucault questioned normativity and our idea of the *self* regarding our culture. His philosophy is situated at the latter end of nearly a century of writings and movements that reacted against the heteronormative system.

The first rights organisation for those people, the Scientific-Humanitarian Committee was formed in Berlin in 1897. In 1924, Henry Gerber, inspired by Magnus Hirschfeld of the Berlin organisation, founded the Society for Human Rights in the United States. In 1943, when Allen Ginsberg met his first serious crush, Lucien Carr, and realised that he was brimming with "a mortal avalanche, whole mountains of homosexuality" ("Kaddish") - before the Stonewall riots of 1969 — homophobia was still very prevalent and, in fact, generally acceptable. It soon became apparent that this discrimination was deeply embedded in the language and social order. Queer theorist Michael Warner says:

Because the logic of the sexual order is so deeply  
Embedded... in an indescribably wide range  
of social institutions, and is embedded in the most  
standard accounts of the world... The  
the dawning realisation that themes of homophobia and heterosexism may  
be read in almost any document of our culture means that we...have an idea  
of how widespread those institutions and accounts are. (*Fear of a Queer  
Planet* xiii)

Ginsberg's entire body of work becomes an attack against the capitalist culture that spawns these prejudices and dictates these definitions and divisions. His queer identity is, therefore, a part of a larger personality comprising anti-establishment and countercultural tendencies. Through his revolutionary - and more often than not outrageous - poetry, Ginsberg did not merely come out as gay; his work, as with his world, was engrossed in a drama of queerness.

Ginsberg's anti-war poetry was in keeping with the popular unrest in the face of the Vietnam ordeal. Against the backdrop of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960's, Ginsberg's New Age fascination with Hinduism and Buddhism resonated with the young generation's propensity towards counterculture and an institutionalized brand of universal spirituality. This climate of social activism was conducive to an inquiry into inherited social and cultural texts; nothing was taken for granted, as it became clear that a prescriptive tradition was not a source of wisdom.

The proscription against homosexuality was due mainly to the idea that the sex act in such relationships was recreational rather than for procreation. Homosexuals threatened the traditional family unit, just as women threatened the reinstatement of war veterans to their original place at the heads of their families. The queer lifestyle, then, became unacceptable to a state that views human relations and morals in binaries; there were no grey areas which alternative identities and sexualities could occupy. Ginsberg and his fellow Beats sought to challenge this common moral code and blur the lines between the prescriptive and prescriptive. Sex was no longer a subject that was taboo outside closed bedroom doors: a strong example is "Sweet Boy, GimmeYr Ass," in which graphic scenes are depicted in vulgar language to communicate love. The scene described in the poem bears a resemblance to Ginsberg's first sexual experience with Peter Orlovsky, his lifetime partner. Orlovsky, who, according to Ginsberg, was always "primarily heterosexual," was in tears afterwards (qt. in Morgan 190). This teary sex act, with sadistic undertones, is the reality of making love.

Ginsberg challenges not merely the proscription against the alternative lifestyle, but also the prohibition against the use of obscene language in poetry. His poetry is a critique of the automatic, controlled nature of man; man is a social automaton who moves in socially approved ways. Since those who did not move thus mechanically were persecuted, the homosexual's daily dialogues were laced with a sense of trepidation. The subversion of language and meaning, therefore, had been an essential part of gay culture and survival even before queer writing became prominent. On the one hand, expression is given, and Ginsberg does not transgress it, but his poetry has very definite referential intentions. To this end, he employs a rhetoric of shock, the objective of which is to jolt the reader into acceptance, to use obscene and scandalous vocabulary to provoke the stringency of the heteronormative subject. He generates this shock value by openly discussing that which exists but is never spoken of, thus exposing the hypocrisy of a standard system. In so doing, he puts forth the need for a more Catholic society. He wants to transform society by letting the words loose and annulling the super-ego.

### *Howl*

The grand success of *Howl* owes a great deal to the obscenity trial that City Lights and Lawrence Ferlinghetti had to face for its publication. The characters in Ginsberg's seminal work bring sexual transgression and perversion onto the streets:

Who bit detectives in the neck and shrieked with delight in police cars for committing no  
 crime but their wild cooking pederasty and intoxication,  
 Who howled on their knees in the subway and were dragged off the roof waving  
 genitals and manuscripts,  
 Who let themselves be fucked in the ass by saintly motorcyclists, and screamed with  
 joy,  
 Who blew and were blown by those human seraphim, the sailors, caresses of Atlantic and  
 Caribbean love,  
 Who balled in the morning in the evenings in rose gardens and the grass of public parks and  
 cemeteries scattering their semen freely to whomever come who May. ("Howl" 1.34-38)

"Howl" has been called the poem that changed America. Taken to be one of the best (if not the best) instances of Beatnik literature, the poem describes a wide range of sexual experiences and expressions. It puts unrelated ideas together to create outrageous new meanings. In this spectacle of unruliness, then, language has accomplished a transgression.

Since meaning is generated through social processes, the Beats, rather than trying to break out of the language in which these processes are rooted, set about subverting the semiotic structure. What was once thought of as beastly and unnatural was now a symbol of rebellion. D'Emilio states:

[Beat poetry] offered gay male readers a self-affirming image of their sexual preference. ... In their rejection of the nuclear family, their willingness to experiment sexually, and, most importantly, their definition of these choices as social protest, the beats offered a model that allowed homosexuals to view their own lives from a different angle. Through the beats' example, gays could perceive themselves as nonconformists rather than deviates, as rebels against stultifying norms rather than immature, unstable personalities.

### **O'Hara's Flamboyant Self**

Stephen Fry, in "*A Simple Backwards man*," observes that language "is, as Philip Howard points out, the only true democracy, changed by those who use it." The queerness of Frank O'Hara's language and style has been largely ignored by critics. This is due mostly to his characteristic rhetoric of casualness that belies the extent of his oppositional stance. The City Poet's attitude may be more aptly defined as gay, rather than queer. His rhetoric is subtler and imagines a more open world. Helen Vendler, in her critique on O'Hara's poetry, suggests that his opposition to traditional ideas of masculinity as well as a conventional ideology is apparent in his lack of proper syntax; both are viewed as part of the same problem, i.e. a painfully normative, dichotomising society (20). His lack of punctuation manifests this openness in form, pushing against restrictions of thought and bringing forth a multiplicity of meanings.

"Memorial Day 1950," O'Hara's version of Rimbaud's "Les Portes de septins," is written in the modernist fashion, inspired, it would seem, by the contents of O'Hara's abode. It was, at that point in history, quite unorthodox yet to admire the modernists. The poem acts as a manifesto for O'Hara's style and influences, particularly his influences in art, namely surrealist painting. It is an enumeration of artistic movements and acts as a historical article for art. While doing so, he manages to assimilate into the form of the poem the styles he so admires, coupling Stein's object catalogue with the surrealist inconsideration for unities, in what Perloff calls a "Dada collage". Perloff also addresses this movie-like quality of the poem which reads like a series of cuts and pans. His bright white toilet set is most fascinating in the linkage he finds between the urban and the natural within such a private act.<sup>4</sup> More importantly, O'Hara has juxtaposed his private surroundings with the movements that led to the pieces of art that decorate his life and influence his art. His friend, and fellow New York School poet, John Ashbery, recalls: "I too stayed at the Robinsons' and remembered admiring Frank's room for the kind of Spartan chic he always managed to create around him." O'Hara establishes a direct and personal connection between him and the artistic greats, by listing their works as part of public history as well as his private space, where "a frying pan on the floor, used as an ashtray" and *Guernica* co-exists (7).

Art transforms one's life by infiltrating one's private space; in O'Hara's case, this environment nourished his "rebellious, creative imagination" (Perloff). His education as a human being has stemmed from these pieces: "naming things is only the intention / to make things." Being one of his earlier poems, its rebelliousness is coloured by naivety: the idea of art that withstands all odds, and grows and flourishes despite society and discouraging parents. As Lezama says, in the 2000 movie *Before Night Falls*, "People that make art are dangerous to any dictatorship. They create beauty. And beauty is the enemy." In this sense, art is a rebellion because it seems to have no purpose. Each

generation of artists is a break away from an "older" one; as O'Hara' poetry progressed, his rebellion grew more covert and could be found only in the permission of his verse.

The luxury and fullness of O'Hara's expression abandon any attempt at a pursuit of unity; the poem would instead immerse itself in a pool of irony and multiple referentiality. It focuses more on the process of meaning generation itself, persuading the reader to take a closer look. This - like obscenity and audacity in Ginsberg - serves as a tool to bring forth the hypocrisy of normative society, and the role of euphemistic language in sustaining this hypocrisy.

The opening lines of "Song" pose ontological and epistemological questions about his sexuality: "Is it dirty/ does it look dirty." Leviticus contains the most direct prohibition of non-procreative sexual acts in the Bible: "You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination (18:22). The word "abomination" is synonymous with "repugnance" and "disgust." The gay lifestyle, much like the city that allows it, is "dirty." The questions are two-fold: the poet's rhetorical questioning of the ontology of his sexuality and his challenging stance towards the public reception of gay identity. Through these queries, he shows the hypocrisy inherent in the creation of public identities: what one "think[s] of in the city" has to do with appearances (how something "look[s]" or "seem [s]")- reality itself is, perhaps, a product of appearances, and just as deceptive. This arbitrary relation between someone comes along with an evil character

someone comes along with an evil character  
he seems attractive, is he really, yes. Very  
he's handsome as his role is bad. Is it. Yes (158)

Here, he questions the readers' conception of the beautiful and the bad: what makes someone "dirty" or "bad"? Why are some attractions sinful? The line "you don't refuse to breathe do you?" that permeates the poem urges one to take in the "dirt." His surrealist tendencies challenge yet another dichotomy - that between dream and reality, imaginative and social existence. Where the Beats forewent the Superego, the New York School unleashed the unconscious, and preferred to skim on the surface of reality The universality of O'Hara's poetry lies in his ability to challenge these binaries and to find beauty in the messy chaos that is the grey area between the whimsical and the His popular poem "Having a Coke with You" has its gay references - from orange shirts to St. Sebastian - but more than anything, the poem is about human intimacy. Having a Coke with You

is even more fun than going to San Sebastian, Irun, HendayeBiarritz,  
Bayonne or being sick

to my stomach on the Travesera de Gracia in  
Barcelona partly because in your orange shirt  
you look like a better happier St. Sebastian  
partly because of my love for you, partly  
because of your love for yoghurt partly

Because of the fluorescent orange tulips around the birches (194) concrete, where all things exist. The poet is secure in his gayness, affirming it and moving past it, to bring forth this universality to his poetry that would otherwise have been deemed the flowery proclamations or promiscuous utterances of a homosexual dandy. He gives the identity its place alongside his various others. This freedom is also manifest in the New York artists' ability to move across classes with relative ease. The mingling of high and low culture evident in "Having a Coke with You," where the images shift from

cokes to coastal islands, is an important part of gay life in New York during the Post-War years. David Bergman in his essay "The queer writer in New York" speaks of this all-encompassing lifestyle.

Being gay is merely a part of Frank O'Hara's humanity; one does not exist independent of the other. This freedom is also manifest in the New York artists' ability to move across classes with relative ease. The mingling of high and low culture evident in "Having a Coke with You," where the images shift from cokes to coastal islands, is an important part of gay life in New York during the Post-War years. David Bergman in his essay "The queer writer in New York" speaks of this all-encompassing lifestyle.

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### Lowell's America

While writing what would later become *Ariel*, Plath confessed to being greatly influenced by Lowell's poetry, notably this collection: "I've been very excited by what I feel is the breakthrough that came with, say, Robert Lowell's *Life Studies*, this intense breakthrough into solemn, very personal, emotional experience which I feel has been partly taboo. Robert Lowell's poems about his experience in a mental hospital, for example, interested me very much" (Orr 167-168). Lowell's confessions, like O'Hara's, operate within the obscurity that results from close inspection. One finds that the more he discloses, the less he reveals. The ceiling/stripping paradox that characterises his poetry is true of all confessional poetry. Lowell successfully fuses the public and the personal: his life was covered widely in publications of the era, and most details of his own life were readily available to the public.

On October 13, 1943, Robert Traill Spence Lowell IV was sentenced to a year in prison for refusing, as a conscientious objector, to be drafted into the U.S. Army, "Memories of West Street and Lepke" from the mock-academically named *Life Studies*, he publicly "confesses" to his dissent. His fusion of the object and the subject places him in tandem with his changing environs. Lowell's object catalogue is informed by a subjective projection, while the epithets he attaches to himself are externally manufactured. As one who names and one who is being named, he is both subject and object. His descriptions are intended to be compared and contrasted. In the end, though, his connections are simply "hanging," "lost." Living in a huge house with extravagant luxuries, Lowell represents his upper-class Boston Brahmin social circle,

where even the man  
scavenging filth in the back-alley trash  
cans, has two children, a beach wagon, a  
helpmate, and is a "young Republican (90)

But alternatively, imprisoned in his "tranquillized" life, he is "manic," rebellious. Here resides the poet who discarded his Mayflower family's tradition, dropped out of Harvard, joined the Catholic Church (only to later leave it), protested the Vietnamese war, and went to Beatnik gatherings. Influenced by Beat poets like Ginsberg, he started writing increasingly "raw," intimate confessional poetry, best collected in *The Life Studies*.

Lowell's poetry (as with all other confessional poetry) does not deal in experience but a memory. Since the remembering self is separate from the experiencing self, memory is coloured by the poet's attitudes as well as his later adventures. In his description of prison life, the details and characterisations of the inmates are caricatures that yet again provided by an external entity, this time the poet. Each prison inmate represents a kind of American-Abramowitz, the hippie; Bioff and Brown of the middle class; Lepke of the mafia power lords and business moguls. His portrayals are influenced by the mainstream narrative and seem to consist of types rather than fully rounded characters. His treatment of the pacifist is of particular interest:

[...] Abramowitz,  
a jaundice-yellow ("it's tan")  
and fly-weight pacifist,  
he wore rope shoes and preferred fallen fruit.  
He tried to convert Bioff and Brown,  
the Hollywood pimps, to his diet.  
Hairy, muscular, suburban,  
wearing chocolate double-breasted suits,  
they blew their tops and beat him black and blue. (90)

Abramowitz's struggles against violence do not seem to yield any positive results; in fact, it is answered with violence. Lowell does not seem to have any sympathy (much less empathy) for the fruitarian. He, like all around him, is merely acting out his given identity.

The identities we carry around, imagining ourselves to be their creators, are, in fact, manufactured merely by our surrounding, our economies, and the social circumstances that we are born into. Our ideologies and religious beliefs are nothing but abbreviations in the end - more labels to classify the "us and the "them"; we are caught up and clothed in these roles. In prison, these symbols are thrown into chaos, "like two toys American / flags tied together with a ribbon of Easter palm." But here, too, he does not belong, just as he does not belong on the outside, where he has so obviously become part of the system, a typical member of his class. These socio-economic, psychoanalytical, political and religious labels are provided as a satire against the black-and-white, literal world of the law, in contrast with the blurred identities of lived life. However, American law was no longer colourless. America had long been a country of diversities, where multiple ethnicities coexist. However, as the number of immigrants increases, there seemed to be no decrease in the nation's fear of difference. Underneath the liberal facade is a country of Puritans apprehensive of any change in the social order. In the 1950's, this containment culture was at its height.

Located firmly in the age of its writing, the primary question the poem raises is that of morality. In a corrupt society, money is everything. The czar of "Murder Incorporated" sits at the head of the criminal hierarchy. He is, in his cell, living the life of a true American, being white, Christian, patriotic, and surrounded by consumer comforts. Louis "Lepke" Buchalter may have committed murder, but how is he any different from the American who is fighting in the wars abroad? Ian Hamilton's reports Jim Peck, an antiwar activist, as having said, "Lowell was in a cell next to Lepke, you know, Murder Incorporated, and Lepke says to him: "I'm in for killing. What are you in for?" 'Oh, I'm in for refusing to kill'" (91). Lepke might, in fact, be the poster boy for the American value system; he, too, was merely a foot soldier. The only line that separates the army man and the hitman is bureaucracy. Just as he has been "lobotomized," America is desensitized into leading morally redundant lives. Lowell's



bourgeois guilt is a reaction against the nation's lack of uneasiness in the face of pointless wars. brainwashed into believing in "the cause."

## Conclusion

In recent times, such domains as education and the marketplace, generally considered elements of the public sphere, are being transposed into the private field. With homeschooling and online shopping, i.e. the internet and the communication revolution, and, on a larger scale, the failure of communism, the capitalist boom and the emergence of more privatized companies, these spheric dualities have been merged and subverted. Today, with the popularity of social networking, privacy is a public stance one must take at one's own risk. Poetry is either too naively confessional or striving hard to be distant. The position once occupied by confessional poetry is now filled by pop music. In an era when more souls are naked, the definition and practice of confessional poetry must change, while the reading of the poetry of Ginsberg, Lowell, and O'Hara cannot but be historicized.

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**Language in India** [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com) ISSN 1930-2940 18:7 July 2018

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