

PART II

JFK, LITERATURE AND THE 1960'S

Chapter 5

THE LONG SHADOW OF THE CONFESSIONAL AND BEAT POETS

...from notes given as a discussant at the 2008 JFK Conference, UND
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From the point-of-view of a creative writing professor, the greatest influence on perceptions of poetry writing today come from the two mid-20th-century schools of poetry known as the Confessionals and Beats. Confessional poetry is a co-opting of lyric poetry wherein autobiography equals authenticity, the more shocking the more privileged; poetry as therapy. Beat poetry purported to be anti-intellectual, “organic,” and professed “first thought, best thought,” despite the fact many of its practitioners taught in universities, were well-schooled in craft, and revised extensively.

I. Confessionals: include primarily Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath, and Anne Sexton, but also W. D. Snodgrass, John Berryman, Randall Jarrell, and Robert Duncan. Characterized by identifying the poet with the poem’s speaker (before 1950, the lyrical “I” was assumed to be a construct), and the use of formal poetics, possibly to attempt to contain life’s ugly underside or as a foil to represent the inability of containment.

Those who are/were proponents feel Confessionalism allows for self-expression, especially for those whose voices had been suppressed (women, homosexuals):

“Rationalism erected a taboo of social shame that lasts against the story of the soul, against the dream and inner life of men the world over, that might be read were the prejudices of what’s right and what’s civilized lost.” –Robert Duncan, *Claims for Poetry*

“To tell the truth to our daughters requires that we acknowledge it ourselves. The poem becomes the tribunal where a persona will not suffice. . . . As the poet refuses to distance herself from her emotions, so she prevents us from distancing ourselves. We are obliged to witness.” –Alicia Ostriker, *Claims for Poetry*

“This drive to self-knowledge, for women, is more than a search for identity: it is part of our refusal of the self-destructiveness of male-dominated society.” “In those years formalism was part of the strategy – like asbestos gloves, it allowed me to handle materials I couldn’t pick up bare-handed.” –Adrienne Rich, *Claims for Poetry*

The problem for some of these writers was that while white heterosexual male experience and lyric poetry could be universal, other points-of-view could only be personal. Some asserted the personal is political – but lyric is often subversive; need it be confessional? Others continue to struggle to reclaim the lyric from the confessional:

“The term ‘confessional,’ first used to describe the self-revealing poetry of Robert Lowell [et al] has become – often with justification – pejorative.” –Joan Aleshire, *After Confession*

Aleshire distinguishes between “lyric: the poem of personal experience [which] can, through vision, craft, and objectivity toward the material, give a sense of commonality with unparalleled intimacy;” versus confessionalism, the intent for “self-display” which “lets the facts take over. . . a plea for special treatment.” She also cites Stephen Yenser who distinguishes between “gossip” (fact, data, raw material) and “gospel” (parable, pattern, truth).

“[Sexton and Plath] gave women of my generation permission to write of the macabre, of bedlam, abortion, depression. . . . But poetry is not a cure-all nor does it promise compassion or forgiveness.” –Colette Inez, *After Confession*

“Beware the poet who values content more than the handling of content, a danger especially present in our most personal poems.” –Stephen Dunn, *After Confession*

II. Beat Poetry: precursors include the “Black Mountain” poets – Charles Olson, Robert Creeley, and Denise Levertov; main practitioners include Allen Ginsberg, Gregory Corso, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Gary Snyder, others. Characterized by so-called “organic form,” process over product, “first thought, best thought.”

Proponents espoused poetry inspired and formed in the moment as more authentic: “Any *form*, and ordering of reality so implied, had somehow to come from the very condition of the experience demanding it.” –Robert Creeley, *Claims for Poetry*

“Writing poetry is a process of discovery, revealing *inherent* music.” Organic form is “a *method of apperception*. . . based on an intuition of an order, a form beyond forms, in which forms partake, and of which man’s creative works are analogies, resemblances, natural allegories.” “The forms more apt to express the sensibility of our age are the exploratory, open ones.” – Denise Levertov, *Claims for Poetry*

Poetry written in this manner was considered more in touch with the primitive, vatic self, and set itself against intellectual institutions:

“Poets, as few others, must live close to the world that primitive men are in. . . . Poetry, it should not have to be said, is not writing or books.” –Gary Snyder, *Claims for Poetry*

“As the poet stands open-mouthed in the temple of life, contemplating his experience, there come to him the first words of the poem.” –Denise Levertov, *Claims for Poetry*

Yet these arguments run counter to actual practice – these poets revised heavily, and had to choose how to shape their work:

“The measured, or formal, the contrived, the artificial are, we feel, insincere; they are perversions of the central value of our life, genuineness of feeling. . . . [But] if informality and antiformality are positive values, then the problem of form is how to get rid of it. But to get rid of it we must keep it; we must have something to get rid of.” –J.V. Cunningham, *Claims for Poetry*

“Forms in the phenomenal world are no more abstractions than any other forms.” – Hayden Carruth, *Claims for Poetry*

“Blake’s voices returned to dictate revisions. The more intimately we observe any poet who claims extremes of inspiration or craftsmanship, the more we realize that his claims are a disguise.” – Donald Hall, *Claims for Poetry*

Even Levertov warned that “organic” was not an excuse for sloppiness: “Not only hapless adolescents, but many gifted and justly esteemed poets writing in contemporary nonmetrical forms, have only the vaguest concept, and the most haphazard use, of the line.” –from *Claims for Poetry*

III. So where does this leave poetry today?

The special danger, particularly for young writers, seems to come from one of Confessionalism’s lasting effects: writers who assume self-expression equals therapy: “Writing a good poem about how bad you feel doesn’t protect you from that feeling or release you from it.” –Alan Shapiro, *Quote Poet Unquote*.

If nearly all the poets of this school committed suicide, did writing such poetry save them?

Other lasting influences of the Confessionals and Beats:

- 1) Readers who assume the speaker-“I” is the same as the autobiographical author: “Readers encountering the “I” may substitute an interest in the affairs and concerns of a presumably real person for the experience of the poem.” –Carol Frost, *After Confession*. I’ve seen this myself countless times in student workshops where students ask “Did this really happen?” and place higher value on that work.

- 2) Writers who interpret the Beats' anti-intellectual stance as meaning *not reading* – the Beats themselves were intimately familiar with the canon of poetry, especially the Romantics, Blake, Whitman, etc.
- 3) As technology (radio, TV, Internet) becomes more omnipresent, the popularity of hearing a poet read live also increases – however, this corresponds to an emphasis on authenticity, and on privileging the poet and his/her life over the poetry.
- 4) Poetry slams are geared toward social listeners, and as a result, the highest scores usually go to autobiographical poetry – the more tragic the better.

Ultimately, I find it both fascinating and troubling that two mid-20th-Century groups of poets – mere drops in the body of written work – could have such a lasting effect on our assumptions about what poetry is and should do. I hope our examination of these schools and their positions, and some of the critiques of those positions, will help us to understand those effects, and question them for ourselves.

Sources:

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