CHAPTER III

CONFESSIONAL POETRY

a) Confessional Literature:

Confession means a disclosure of some sort which in its literary application, is closely identified with autobiography. It acquired literary significance with Augustine's Confessions. European confessional writings are very personal and present a subjective account of experiences, beliefs, feelings, ideas and state of mind, body, and soul. According to Northrop Frye, confession is "autobiography regarded as a form of prose fiction, or prose fiction cast in the form of autobiography", and is both creative and fictional. It has an integrated pattern and it tends to be intellectualized in content as the author feels his own life and views on and about religion, politics, or art worth recording. The various scenes, that Augustine's psychological document describes, indicate a new creative experience of the author and his understanding of himself and life conceived as a process sometimes an endless sequence, of affirmation and negations. With Rousseau's The Confessions, confession as a sincere document searching for the true self and as a means

of affirming, one’s existence, emerged as a distinct genre in literature. The Prelude of William Wordsworth is a blending of the romantic impulse and the autobiographical. And Wordsworth, as Roy Pascal puts it, "is the first autobiographer to realize ... that the deepest purpose of autobiography is the account of a life as a projection of the real self ..."2 De Quincey’s Confessions is the portrait of self as an exile from society, not glorifying his perversion but emphasizing suffering and pain. His Confessions deviates from the traditional religious confession in refusing to see his life in relation to any paradigm of grace.

As Robert Phillips in his introductory chapter to The Confessional Poets observes that "The sense of the eternal torture is one of the motivating forces behind any confessional art".3 What began as a concern for the self and an intense awareness of evil in Saint Augustine’s Confessions developed into deep existential anguish of the protagonists in personal writings.

Dostoevsky’s novels too reflect confessional element by their constant concern for the problems of guilt,

sin and salvation and by psychosis. Sartre called Dostoevsky a "Christian novelist" because of 'the Christian conception of sin' that corresponds to one of the principles of writing fiction."4 Dostoevsky is religious in his concern for self-discovery and in his search for an inner reality. The protagonist of his most obviously confessional novel, Notes from Underground, finds his own consciousness, a burden and a source of sufferings. The underground man is perhaps the first model of an anti-hero whose affirmations are dubious. For him there is no final resolution of tensions nor total redemption. He is not even sure of his human identity. His opening lines "I am a sick man ... a mean man. There is nothing attractive about me",5 drives home the idea that he exists on the periphery of human society. Axthelm, who traces the origin of modern confessional novel in Dostoevsky, summing up the qualities of Dostoevskean confession observes: "Each of Dostoevsky's heroes ultimately retreats from a position of redemption. What remains is a fuller self-knowledge, a perception rather than a purgation. The hero is never saved or absolved by confession, but he does gain a vision of his 'foundations' and his motives, he finds a meaning - however terrible to sustain him in an otherwise


meaningless world".6 His self-consciousness and inability to communicate characterize him as a confessional hero. Colin Wilson sees in him the attribute of the outsider. He says:

Notes from Underground is an unpleasant story, so unnecessarily unpleasant as to be barely readable. What it does convey, more than any other work we have quoted, is the tortured, self-divided nature of the outsider".7

The twentieth century fiction presents a world agonizingly divided, and a line of characters for whom reality means something else. The hero in Herman Hesse's Steppenwolf considers himself partly a man and partly as wolf embodying an under world of lawlessness and gloominess unable to reconcile to the civilized exterior he displays. Steppenwolf lives 'a suicidal existence'. His sense of identity is so fragile that he thinks there are many I's within self with every thought and impulse claiming its own identity. While the confessional writers of the nineteenth century such as De Quincy and Dostoevsky establish a pattern or a myth by which they try to define true selfhood, and attempt to explore their moral standing in a system of belief, as Rousseau has

made in his own life basis for his theories through professing the tenets of Romanticism and Dostoevsky's didacticism discernible in his novels, the twentieth century confessional mode has a radical departure from its nineteenth century origins without any moral norm common to author and reader. Jean Genet's The Thief's Journal representing twentieth century confession in its opening lines draws a contrast between flowers and convicts: "The fragility and delicacy of the former are of the same nature as the brutal insensitivity of the latter".8 There is no conventional morality in the world of Genet who neither justifies nor pities himself. Existence to him is a continuous feeling of crisis, a perpetual contingency. Genet, in the course of confession, interprets his past through the present, and thus making some of his confessions but accounts of his own disintegration. The confessional heroes of the novels Nausea and The Fall of Sartre and Camus resemble that of Genet. Antoine Roquentin of Nausea is an intellectual hero engaged in perpetual debate with himself, cut off from the exterior world, questioning the reality of history itself. Camus' The Fall (1956) presents a hero, Jean-Baptiste Clemence who calls himself 'Judge-penitent', making the reader assume the role of a

'defendant-confessor'. In its psychological violence depicted in The Fall, the hero gradually and systematically destroys every system of belief that affords ontological security and exposes himself to the final disintegration that could end only in either insanity or suicide. Peter M. Axthelm observes in The Modern Confessional Novel: "As a hero, Jean-Baptiste Clemence is the end product of the current of disintegration which pervades the confessional novels of Gide and Sartre. He has lost the one redeeming quality which makes confession possible for even the most tormented sinner-honesty". Clemence who is a diabolical intellectual inducing a sense of guilt in the reader to trap him psychologically, tries to convert the reader towards his own private belief through his arguments. He confesses his own intention behind his confessional strategies: "So, I have been practicing my useful profession at Mexico City for sometime. It consists to begin with, as you know from experience, in indulging in public confession as often as possible. I accuse myself up hill and down dale. It's not hard, for I have now acquired a memory ... No, I navigate skilfully, multiplying distinctions and digressions too - in short I adapt my words to my listener and lead him to go to me one better .... I construct a portrait which is the image of all

and of no one. A mask, in short, rather like those Carnival masks ..."10 Henry Peyre sees The Fall as an almost total satire, denying all possibilities for meaningful confession.

Edgar Dryden, in an essay on Melville points out that "The American writer continuously sings a 'Song of Myself'.11 Autobiography seems to suit the American genius so well that most of the American classics, from Benjamin Franklin to Richard Wright, have this element of the first person singular. For Americans dropping out or the rejection of the accepted norms of behaviour is a normal phase of educative process. Thoreau's Walden or Life in the Woods as well as Whitman's 'Song of myself' are autobiographical accounts of men who deliberately turned inward, alienating themselves from society, in order to learn how to live more completely within the society. Though their approaches differ, they finally achieve a flowing out of the self toward the universal which amounts to a return to one's moorings in society.

(b) Romantic and Confessional Modes: American poetry till the mid-twentieth century influenced by the transcendental


philosophy tried to insert American who has alienated himself from his society into the mainstream of life. The nineteenth century American Romantic poetry also affirmed the individual identity. Professor Sculley Bradley has observed that Whitman's 'self' has 'socialized' reference as the 'I' of old ballads and that Whitman assumed for himself "only what all others could have on their own terms assumed".12

The confessional mode of expression can be traced back to the solipsistic poetry of the nineteenth century Romantics and their turning to the dramatic and self-dramatization. The confessional poet remains a dropout and, even when he returns, his return is only partial or temporary. And hence the confessional poet breaks out of the world or rhetoric into the realm of the real and the personal with negative understatement as in "I myself am hell/Nobody is here"13 or "I simply cannot see where there is to get to".14

It is argued that the fundamental American experience operates between the polarities of exile and return.

While the American fiction and autobiographical writings in prose have depicted exiles who did not or could not return, the Romantic poetry of the nineteenth century, in general, presents an affirmative voice of the poet's involvement in society. The confessional poets of the twentieth century talk of the American experience of rejecting the original situation for an alternative and preferring to live as lost men in pursuit of better alternatives as in Roethke's long confessional sequence entitled 'Lost Son'. But with Plath love-hate relationship with her father becomes a destructive passion in making her a lost daughter. Lowell's quarrel with his family, his ancestors and the American culture has forced him become a conscientious objector during the Second World War and subsequently an important member of the protest march towards Pentagon aimed against the Vietnam War during the sixties. Some poets have kept themselves aloof from events and principles of religious or metaphysical or even political significance.

The difference in the two modes of expression in Romantic and Confessional poetry can be seen in the analysis and the role of the first person singular. In Romantic poetry it is the presence of the poet's self that is generic and universal that operates in making the poem coherent and organic, whereas in Confessional poetry the first person singular assumes the role of a character in a novel passing
through a chain of situations, acting under the influence of several forces within and without and becoming in the process an intricate figure. The "I" in Romantic poetry is as in Whitman: "Its becoming is but an expansion of its being. In a sense its end precedes its beginning", but the confessional "I" on the contrary is in a continuous process of becoming and which can be defined only in relation to the psychological matrix of the experience described in the poem. Of the frailty of Roethke's 'I' which can be applied to all confessional poetry, Eugene Goodheart observes: "Unlike the myriad 'identity' of Whitman, the sheer translucence of the Wordsworthian 'I' in which the poet becomes pure medium of the scene, Roethke's refractory, self-doubting 'I' stands between the reader and the natural scene". Unlike the Romantics, most of the confessional poets are non-conformists and do not make definite statements on and about traditional and cultural values. But the typical American autobiographer asserts his cultural connection and considers himself part of the American myth "which describes human history as a pilgrimage from imperfection to perfection, from a dimly

American poets of the nineteenth century related their personal experience to the American experience and exalted its greater destiny but conforming to the course of American myth. Walt Whitman, assimilating mythological themes informing an autobiographical personality as an archetypal individual, prophesied a bright future for America.

The presence of another type of autobiographic impulse in American literature is noticed by Spengemann and Lundquist in which "unable to adopt a unifying attitude, the autobiographer in this uncertain condition substitutes for exposition an examination of details of experience",18 as in confessional mode of expression. For Peter N. Axthelm, the hero of a confessional novel at some point in his life examines "his past as well as his innermost thoughts, in an effort to achieve some sort of perception".19 The confessional poet, too, like the hero in a confessional novel, rejects the


18. Ibid., p.108.

American myth of perfectibility and casts himself in a role not prescribed by the society. Unlike the Romantic poet who often "lost his personal complaint in the music of universal forlornness", the confessional poet, dealing with the psychological central experience and preoccupations with extreme states of mind, examines the psychic disintegration of self resulting from the rejection of established norms of judgment. The confessional poet's sense of guilt springs from his inability to totally comply with his culture and from his internal conflict leading to psychosis. Karl Malkoff opined that "the work of Lowell, Roethke, Plath, Sexton and the others must be placed in the context of not only private, confessional poetry, but the poetry of madness as well".20 Roethke placed himself in the tradition of Christopher Smart, Blake and John Clare. He suffered from depressive psychosis sometimes verging on insanity. In "In a Dark Time" he says: "What's madness but nobility of soul/ At odds with circumstance?"21 This secular view of insanity is shared by Robert Lowell who too had similar depressions in the later period of his life and Sylvia Plath who had frequent nervous breakdown and committed suicide in 1962. Neurosis becomes part of the


world of the confessional poet who often grapples with the inner violence of the self in his/her poems.

Susan Sontag in her long essay "Illness as Metaphor" argues that insanity has come to symbolize the predicament of the writer in the twentieth century: "In the twentieth century, the repellent, harrowing disease that is made the index of a superior sensitivity, the vehicle of 'spiritual' feelings and 'critical' discontent, is insanity".22 Thoreau, who also suffered from this dreadful disease wrote in 1852 that death and disease were often beautiful, like the hectic glow of consumption. Tuberculosis and insanity reduce their victims to exiles. Susan Sontag points out: "Not TB but insanity is the current vehicle of our secular myth of self-transcendence. The romantic view is that illness exacerbates consciousness. Once that illness was TB; now it is insanity that is thought to bring consciousness to a state of paroxysmic enlightenment".23

The predilection for psychologizing one's experience is a twentieth century phenomenon. Alvarez in his talk with Robert Lowell said of the confused state of arts in

23. Ibid., p.36
America, in 1965 that psycho-analysis was the "document mode for the American interpretation of reality", and that the analysis rendered it difficult to exist purely rationally and "on the surface, at least with any conviction". For the confessional poet who has neither religious faith nor any substantial sense of his own self as real or natural, psychologizing affords a way of sublimating his suffering "a secular, ostensibly scientific way of affirming the primacy of 'spirit' over matter". Lowell seems to subscribe to this belief when he said, "Freud seems the only religious teacher .... Freud is a prophet .... he continues both the Jewish and Christian tradition, and puts it, may be in a much more rational position".

The disorientation of the poet's mind might also be seen against the background of the sixties in America which valued irrational experience for its own sake. The sixties in America was a period of fierce individualism, paranoid fear and drug induced psychological trips. Following the 'tranquilized fifties', the sixties was revolutionary, inventive and visionary of which Morris Dickstein remarked that "what happened in the sixties was .... one of

25. Ibid., p.40
26. Ibid., p.41.
those deep-seated shifts of sensibility that alters the whole moral terrain.27 The ethos of self-fulfilment central to the American culture of the sixties facilitated confessional poetry. In the sixties the emphasis had been an element of uniqueness in the personality of every individual which must be realised "whether through personal mysticism or through political activity or some kind of salvation through artistic activity.28 In the early sixties Confessional poetry, there is a search for authenticity by energizing the self. Of the new concept of the self and the quest for authenticity Dickstein comments that : "The authentic person aims to become himself, not simply to be himself. The self must be created and won, not simply excavated. Authenticity is related to both modernism and psychoanalysis in its affinity for irrational and the unconscious, for masks, roles and fantasies, for all the complications and by ways of selfhood rather than its broader, more sweeping simplicities".29

As the humorists of the early sixties moving away from realism used "over-articulated forms and insanely comprehensive plots" to express what he sees as the insanity of

28. Ibid., p.58.
29. Ibid., p.191.
contemporary history, the confessional poets too share such an absurdist vision of the world. But the surrealist imagery of Plath and Roethke points to the presence of the fantastic and the bizarre in their experience of the world. In 'Death & Co.,' Plath views the two aspects of death as two businessmen who have come to pay a courtesy call. She says:

"I do not stir.  
The frost makes a flower,  
The dew makes a star,  
The dead bell,  
The dead bell".30

In 'The Far Field', Roethke pictures the surrealistic figure of an old man, "in robes of green, in garments of adieu":

"His spirit moves like monumental wind  
That gentles on a sunny blue plateau.  
He is the end of things, the final man.31

The confessional poet's sense of himself as a victim may be traced to the artist's over-exposure to a capitalist society.

Robert Phillips in his discourse on Confessional Mode in Modern American Poetry has observed certain salient features in the post-modern confessional poetry currently


written in America. To him the poetry is highly subjective and an expression of personality, not an escape from it, therapeutic and/or purgative with its emotional content personal rather than impersonal. The post-modern confessional poetry is often a narrative portraying unbalanced, afflicted or alienated protagonists, employing irony and understanding for detachment. According to Robert Phillips, in the Confessional Poetry the self is used as a poetic symbol around which is woven a personal mythology and there are no subject barriers of subject matter and between the reader and the poet. The poetry is written in the bare language of ordinary speech, in open forms and displaying moral courage of the poet and the self. The poetry is also found to be anti-establishment in content, with alienation as a common theme along with other themes like personal failure and neurosis. Robert Phillips feels that the poet strives for personalization rather than for universalization. The Confessional poets have explored that domain of experience in their poetry where the self is confronted in a destructive landscape of passion and paranoia. Their concerns, though personal in essence, belong to the contemporary period in their broad framework and amount to an intensification of certain elements inherent in the confessional tradition in literature as a whole.
c) Lowell and Plath: Objectivity and Confessional Mode:

Confessional poem is more intensely personal than a lyric poem. The labelling of the poetry of Sylvia Plath and Robert Lowell as the poetry of confession may be misleading for it implies according to Joan Bobbitt "a gratuitous involvement with self which is markedly absent from the poems of either poet".32 Certainly the subject matter of each is personal: a sense of incompleteness, pain, self-loathing, violence. In Plath, it is an inescapable preoccupation with death. According to Robert Phillips the major characteristic of the genre is a 'highly subjective', 'expression of personality' which distinguishes it from the form practised and lauded by nonlyrical poets like Eliot and Pound. Phillips comments further that the "true confessional poet places few barriers, if any, between his self and direct expression of that self".33 He rejects the persona or objective correlative and "employs the self as sole poetic symbol".34 And Yet the medium of poetry seems to serve both Lowell and Plath as a vehicle for emotional disengagement, especially in For the Union Dead and Ariel. In 'The Flaw'

34. Ibid., p.7-8.
death is seen as something that happens not only to other
people but also to oneself. Driving past a little country-
graveyard with his wife, Lowell, the poet gets a speck in his
eye, and his fractured vision transforms the gravestones that
he sees into his own tomb:

"In a flash,
I see us whiten into skeletons,
our eager, sharpened cries, a pair of stones,
cutting like shark-fins through the
boundless wash".35

In "Night Sweat" the speaker suffers from a tran-
sient episode of fever, but as he feels the "creeping
damp/float over my pajamas/wilted white", it seems as if "my
life's fever is soaking in night sweat". (FUD, p.68) Thus
the ordinary physical ailments are always seen as significant
of a more profound mental or spiritual disorder. In 'Child's
Song', the "little muddler" tries to derive comfort from
touching a loved one: "Sometimes I touch your hand/ across
my cot,/ and our fingers knot". (FUD, p.22) But then he
sadly realizes that "there's no hand/to take me home". (FUD,
p.22)

In Plath's poem "kindness" the tone of finality is
more obvious. The image of blood is suggestive of a life

35. Robert Lowell, For the Union Dead, Farrer, Straus &
Giroux, New York, 1965, p.66. In subsequent pages the
title of the book is abbreviated as FUD.
that is being drained out of her. Poetry is part of that hemorrhage:

"The blood jet is poetry.
There is no stopping it". 38

Blood signifies life and its syphoning which is poetry, means death.

Though the content of their work is appropriately personal, their attitude towards it and treatment of it are frequently detached and impersonal. Indeed the tone of their self-description is primarily clinical and analytical. The poet looks at his subject as though it were a strange, and his disgust at what he sees manifests itself through images which mock and profane his own body. With few exceptions, this objective distancing is an inherent and important part of their poetry and the definition of the confessional mode, a term which M.L.Rosenthal, who coined it, calls, "both helpful and too limited",37 must encompass this fact as well as its implications.

Gabriel Pearson has made critical observation that Lowell's handling of autobiographical material has the effect


not of making his poetry more personal but depersonalising his own life. In "Caligula", Robert Lowell describes how he borrowed his nickname 'cal' from the infamous Roman Emperor in whom he sees his "lowest depths of possibility". The spiritual deformity of Lowell's namesake is evident through the images emphasizing his physical hideousness. This device of Lowell, Plath has effectively used in her poetry. In "Caligula", (FUD, p.49) in the impotent emperor Lowell senses a kindred being which becomes more pronounced in the later shortened version of the poem in Lowell's Notebook but changing the last line from "my namesake, and the last Caligula" (FUD, 49) as it is in "For the Union Dead" to "my namesake, not the last Caligula" a significant alteration. Hence the wretchedness of guilt and self-loathing of that man becomes Lowell's not merely by association but by direct implication. In 'Eye and Tooth' parts of the body are used as metaphors symbolizing the persona's guilt and pain. His eye is rent and bleeding, "the old cut cornea throbbed". Consequently he sees things "darkly" as though "through an unwashed gold


fish flobe". (FUD, p.19) Significantly, the poet is trapped within the glass and cannot flee from the torment of his memories. His torn eye throbs but there is no oil with which to soothe it. It is not his tooth which cannot be dislodged, but "the house with my first tooth/ noosed in a knot to the door knob". (FUD, p.19) Hence the past serves to maim the speaker in the present and possibly in the future. Inescapable, it exacts the proverb's retribution. In 'The Neo-Classical Urn', however, the distance between the speaker and his suffering becomes more pronounced. The tone of the poem is sardonic. The poet compares his head to "a turtle shell/stuck on a pole" (FUD, p.47) which implies both emptiness and death. Yet the "skinny shell" once hummed with mechanical energy which made his hair "electrical" and his "juices alive with/ferment..." (FUD, p.47) His body is run artificially by a motor. Like the person in "Eye and Tooth" he has a past, those "raw gobs of hash" (FUD, p.47) which were once turtles, to haunt him. Yet despite the fact that he has destroyed them (and a part of himself, also a turtle), there can be no pain for either of them. The speaker need not pay for his actions, for he has sacrificed nothing of value. Equating himself with the turtle, the poet admits his own insignificance, and by extension, the worthlessness of human nature. His head, "that turtle shell", (FUD, p.47) is a type of urn itself, one that symbolizes death and destruction. Still he is able to stand back and objectively view
the "crippled last survived pass", (FUD, p.47) those replicas of his own disintegration. This same objectivity is even more evident in the fourteen-line 'High Blood', included in Lowell's Notebook. Here the persona clinically watches and then passes judgment on the worth of his life's blood as it is pumped into crystal pipes. This detachment, so similar to that of Sylvia Plath, is an essential part of his tone. Lowell calmly compares the sight to red sticks like lady-crackers. Yet ladycrackers have some meaning for a child. To Lowell, the blood which comprises nine-tenths of his body is lousy stuff. Not only does it have the disadvantage of being messy and distasteful to the beholder as it stains, slips, drips, sticks, but it also fails to give the body warmth. Yet this lukewarm flow becomes invaluable when weighed against the worthless trifles which surround it. In an all-compassing judgment, Lowell deems the remainder of the body "peripheral flotsam". In still another mock-epic catalog, the parts of the body and even the soul itself are listed and then dismissed as being of no consequence. Ultimately, Lowell's verdict calls into question the value of life itself, and from his position as disinterested judge, he rules that it is at best a rather feeble effort.

Like Lowell, Sylvia Plath identifies herself with deformity of various kinds. Most often, however, her images concern physical infirmity which serves as an indication of
inner decay. In 'The Applicant', she demands that incompleteness and disability to be a prerequisite for her "sort of a person". The "glass eye", "false teeth", and "crutch" represent lackings in the individual. Like Caligula's shrunken genitals, the rubber breasts and rubber crotch symbolize the poet's feelings of inadequacy and impotency. In order to qualify as the speaker's potential suitor, the applicant must also have experienced the pain born of physical or emotional deficiency. The frequent use of such images in Plath's poetry reflects her distinct sense of self-loathing. Yet the tone of this particular poem seems to be mocking aloofness, even though the subject is the poet herself. In 'Cut', Plath's detachment from self takes the form of indifference to her own physical mutilation. As Charles Newman observes, here is "a voice at once removed from the crises it invokes". Plath likens her thumb to a scalped pilgrim and the subsequent flow of blood to a red carpet.

"Your turkey wattle
Carpet rolls".


In salute, she steps on the carpet and toasts her sliced member with pink champagne. This tone of feigned elation, or what Lowell terms "macabre gaiety", changes, however, in the next surrealistic image. The particulars of the flowing blood become an army of marching red coat soldiers.

"A celebration, this is.
Out of a gap
A million soldiers run,
Redcoats, everyone". (AL, p.13)

Yet the speaker questions whose sides they are on. The poet's amused detachment gives way to trepidation as her blood becomes a potential enemy. Once again the maimed body is indicative of degeneration on a larger scale: even a rent thumb can initiate further decay. Addressing her "homunculus", that tiny replica of a human being, she confesses her fear that the torn thumb will be the agent of her destruction. Terming it a "sabateur" and "trepanned veteran", Plath implies that she has been tricked and ensnared by a treacherous foe. Because it becomes from within, this treachery is all the more heinous. Like a Japanese suicide pilot, her "Kamikaze" thumb sets out to destroy the living body of which it is a part.

"The thin
Papery feeling
Sabateur,
Kamikaze man -" (AL, p.14)
This distrust of the body becomes still more evident in 'Lady Lazarus'. Here, however, it is worthless and cumbersome obstacle to death and the oblivion which that state will bring. As in "Cut" and Lowell's "High Blood", the poet clinically describes the body as a "million filaments", of no more value than "trash".

"What a million filaments". (AL, p.7)

The unshrouding of the poet's spirituality dead but technically alive body, becomes a sardonic parody of a strip-tease.

"The peanut-crunching crowd
Shoves in to see
Then unwrap me hand foot-
The big strip tease". (AL, p.7)

Using a stylistic device similar to that employed by Lowell, Plath enumerates the parts of her anatomy for the benefit of the "peanut-crunching crowd".

"Gentlemen, ladies
These are my hands
My knees.
I may be skin and bone,
Nevertheless, I am the same, identical woman". (AL, p.7)

Yet, she too is a spectator at her own 'resurrection', and she is amazed that her body has been found to be still functional. Indeed she questions the judgment of the doctors who have termed her 'living' and resents their disinterested
triumph over her revived carcass. In the poet's own estimation, her flesh and bone amount to nothing. The 'cake of soap', 'wedding ring', and 'gold filling' are worth no more than the peripheral flotsam of the poet's body in 'High Blood'.

"A cake of soap,
A wedding ring,
A gold filling". (AL, p.8)

Hence the "theatrical comeback" is anticlimatic. Her face "featureless", her eyes mere pits, the poet possesses the characteristic of death, and yet is ironically denied its solace. In "The Surgeon at 2 A.M.", which appears in Crossing the Water, Sylvia Plath rejects the position of unwilling patient and assumes the role of a physician. Though the body under her care is not directly identified as her own, the imagery is suggestive of "Lady Lazarus", and such an assumption does not seem too farfetched. The poem abounds in metaphors of sterility and death. In the 'artificial', 'hygienic' light of the operating room, even germs are unable to survive. The body under the 'frozen' sheet has no definable features, though the "seven holes thumbed in" (AL, p. 171) suggest a skull-like appearance.

In the second ten lines, however, the tone changes. What was a 'peaceful' scene becomes a riot of color and sensations as the poet begins to operate once again. Plath demonstrates her fear of the body as its 'tubers and
fruits', ooze their "jammy substances". (AL, p.171) The organs become 'roots' and 'snakes' that may at any moment coil around her. With a vitality of their own, they seem to reject the false peace imposed on them in this artificial situation. The poet stands in awe and feels diminished as a consequence. And finally, she becomes "worm(s) and hack(s) in a purple wilderness", (AL, p.171) as though in frenzied defense from an impending attack. In the following stanza, however, the physician assumes control again, as surrealistic involvement is replaced by professional objectivity. Indeed the poet-physician derives aesthetic pleasure viewing the blood as a sunset. Still, it attempts to mar the scene by seeping out of the body. She is able to stop it, nonetheless, and channel it back into the "intricate blue piping under this pale marble". (AL, p.171) Thus the veins and arteries are endowed with the attributes of Roman aqueducts, and the body becomes a "Roman thing", inoffensive and safe because dead art poses no threat. Ultimately the physician is transformed into an artist by the "statue" she has perfected. All that remains of the original body is "floatsam", the malignant parts which have been carefully carved from the "pathological salami". (AL, p.171) Having mastered the body and created a work of art, the poet-physician walks godlike "among sleepers in gauze sarcophagi", (AL, p.171) ready to raise another Lazarus.
What both Lowell and Plath ultimately succeed in doing is to separate themselves totally from their subject matter. According to Eliot's dictum, this creative distancing is a requisite of artistic perfection. Yet it involves a certain "imaginative risk", as Lowell himself acknowledges, when consummate artistry is purchased at the expense of the self. Robert Phillips points out that all confessional art

"is a means of killing the beasts which are within us, those dreadful dragons of dreams and experiences that must be hunted down, cornered, and exposed in order to be destroyed".44

Such a theory presumes, of course, that there will be something more making paradoxically though, the creative act being synonymous with the act of destruction. When the artist loses all contact with the self which is his subject, the killing becomes easier and without bounds.

Robert Lowell's Life Studies narrates his treatment in and return from an expensive "house for the mentally ill" and his final statement of acceptance and about his little triumph in a world which the poet himself acknowledges "I myself am hell". His confessional poetry is in a way

self-discovery as in Life Studies - the poems of which are indeed autobiographical. In the book Lowell himself becomes the man on the cross and in 'Skunk Hour' the last poem of the book, he describes himself as climbing 'the hill's skull', an allusion to Golgotha, the 'Hill of the Skull' is also called Calvary.

Plath's poetry addresses itself to a basic schism in the nature of experience. Its brilliance and violence are inseparable. "In her poetry reality and imagination, love and hate, autonomy and dependence, nature and self interact with each other to produce a poetry of continuous becoming".45 Plath's use of her own life in her poetry is an effort to bring together the divergent aspects of her experiences. Confession in her poetry assumes the form of a unifying principle attaining personal validity. The psychological images latent in the poems of The Colossus reverberate also in her late poems. In her final poems, confession becomes the energizing principle that activates and holds together a life that is falling apart under the threatening violence of its own discoveries.

Confessional writers, from Saint Augustine to Genet, have been engaged over the centuries, in defining

their identity in respect of reality of their personal experience. The outer world in these writers is the manifestation of the inner, turbulent psyche. In the poetry of Lowell and Plath we notice the pervasive sense of personal crisis, and their central experience is the division of self. The reality depicted as schizoid R.D. Laing defines as "an individual the totality of whose experience is split in two main ways: in the first place, there is a rent in his relation with his world, and in the second, there is a disruption of his relation with himself".46 In the case of Roethke and Plath, their fathers died at a psychologically crucial point in their lives, occasioning a burden of guilt which they had to exercise through their poetry. Roethke's "The Lost Son" and Plath's 'The Beekeeper's Daughter', 'The Colossus', and 'Daddy' speak of their guilty conscience.

In 'The Colossus' there is a breakdown of communication, between the daughter and the father, the broken statue emitting only "mulebray, pig-grunt and bawdy cackles".47 In "The Stones" the poet is reduced further to a state of petrifaction:


"The mother of pestles diminished me. 
I became a still pebble". (TCP, p.136)

Her breakdown is a fall "out of light". In her deranged state she enters "the stomach of indifference, the worldless cupboard". (TCP, p.136) When she says, "Love is the bone and sinew of my curse" (TCP, p.137) she is identifying the root cause of her malady. The experience of 'Face Lift' is typical:

"Skin doesn't have roots, it peels away easy as paper. / When I grin, the stitches tauten. I grow backward. I'm twenty". (TCP, p.156)

The poem 'Daddy' opens with an image of mutilation: father is the "black shoe" (TCP, p.222) in which she has been living for thirty years, "poor and white,/ Barely daring to breathe or Achoo". (TCP, p.222) It is pertinent to remember that Plath's father had to be amputated for gangrene in the leg before he died of diabetes. Thus, the black shoe suggests the memory of father's disfigured body which in turn becomes an emblem of the poet's mutilated self. The inhibiting influence of father robbed her of any substantial sense of being. She had to kill his memory in order to live on:

"Daddy, I have had to kill you 
You died before I had time". (TCP, p.222)

The memory of father persists, in spite of her effort to evade him in her poetry. It was her attachment to
her father that precipitated her mental conflicts that assumed the proportions of a psychic disturbance. Her incestuous infatuation finds expression in the image of her father as a statue:

"Marble-heavy, a bag full of God, Ghastly statue with one grey toe Big as a Frisco seal." (TCP, p.222)

Later her father is transformed into a fascist, the ultimate metaphor of authority.

"I have always been scared of you, With your Luftwaffe, your gobbledygoo. And your neat mustache And your Aryan eye, bright blue. Panzer-man, Panzer-man, O you - Not God but a swastika So black no sky could squeak through" (TCP, p.223)

The earlier image of ghastly statue as "a bag full of God" is rejected here in favour of a black 'swastika' that envelops the whole sky. From the obscenity of German language she descends to the vulgarity of power that is at the root of fascism.

In Lowell's case, his father could not live up to his expectations, thus engendering a permanent cleavage in his mind. Lowell's poems about his father in Life Studies are particularly harsh in his portrayal of a sense of acute inferiority. In the father's absolute failure, Lowell is posing the situation of a son growing into his own maturity without the father as any kind of guide. Childhood and the
child's manhood are difficult burdens in Lowell's poetry. The poems about the father, overdone as they are, are nevertheless the logical portraits of the orphan spirit, the myopia of being, that haunt the poet. These poems constitute in effect, Lowell's 'Letter to His Father'. Finally, these poems are Lowell's sad, disappointed notations on the failed ideal of a proper and exhilarating military energy.

Since Roethke, Lowell and Plath suffered from a deep sense of ontological insecurity, their poems address themselves to the basic problems concerning selfhood. The overriding of their poetry is a quest for authentic self. Their poems show, time and again, that the self has to be salvaged from the ruins of disintegration. The poems are attempts to create and preserve the self in a disintegrating world.

As the confessional writer is unable to cast himself in roles prescribed by society, the final vision of Roethke, Lowell and Plath is one of nihilistic despair. They are unable to locate any abiding sense of security in any system. Roethke's symbol of "the rose in the seawind" is a vision of form changing into formless. Plath's last poem describes words as riderless horses pounding away from a stagnant centre. One of the most powerful images in the poetry of Lowell is that of "a lot of spiders crying
together, but without tears",48 as it is illustrated in "For the Union Dead", signifying a Calvinist hell of guilt and despair.

The psychological implications of confessional poetry have hardly gone unnoticed by critics. In recent years, Lowell's and Plath's lives have received as much attention as their art. Along with others of their school, they have been labelled as "Madhouse Muses". While their work has been described as the "poetry of annihilation"49 and "poetry which screams of the suicidal",50 yet few have noted that the very control and objectivity of the creator may provide an important clue to the psychological riddle. The irony, as R.K. Meiners observes, is that "the artist must be granted his donnee even if that donnee bears witness to the possible extinction... of the personality itself".51 But perhaps the final irony is the confessional poet's awareness of this risk and his willingness to take it. As John Berryman


50. Ibid., p.128.

observed, "we are using our skins for wallpaper and we cannot win". 52 The question however still persists whether there is a victory in such defeat.