What is confession? According to the Oxford English Dictionary, "confession" would mean - "A making known or acknowledging of one's fault, wrong, crime, weakness ........ Acknowledgement before the proper authority of the truth of a statement.......... The confessing of sins to a priest.... A formulary in which a church or body of Christians set forth the religious doctrines which it considers essential........"¹

Thus, two meanings of the term may be inferred from this definition: the first related to an individual making admission of a crime or a sin, the second related to a group of people professing common faith in a religious system. Confessions are usually made voluntarily. The impulses and motives underlying them, however, differ with individuals and circumstances.

In criminal law "confession" constitutes "a verbal declaration by an accused person of facts which, along with other facts, have a tendency to prove guilt but are not in themselves sufficient to support a conviction, or which prove incriminating conduct tending to establish guilt."² The law distinguishes between judicial confessions and extra-judicial confessions: judicial confessions are those made before a magistrate or in court in the course of legal proceedings, whereas extra-judicial confessions are made elsewhere than before a magistrate or in open court. At times, third degree
methods are adopted by the police to force confessions and 'clinch' a case. But such forced confessions are not accepted by the law. Only when they are voluntarily made are confessions admissible. It is the court that decides whether a confession is voluntary or not.

In religion "confession" has a double meaning. According to the Roman Catholic practice it is the orally made admission of a sin or error to a priest to obtain counsel and possibly absolution and is required at least once a year. This is sacramental or auricular confession. We also have confession of faith, "the formal statement of the doctrines of a church organisation, an expanded creed, often in the form of a catechism." Thus, the meaning of confession in religion is different from its interpretation according to criminal law. Confession to a priest and confession of faith pertain to the religious and spiritual belief of a man but criminal confession has no such religious basis.

Confession is not confined to religion or to crime. We have confession in literature, too. Literature has its roots directly in life. The views of the writer are expressed through his work. Sometimes they are in a veiled form, taking the shape of an allegory or a parable; they may also be expressed directly with, or without, the help of symbols. According to Matthew Arnold, literature is a criticism of life as interpreted
by the writer. The world is reflected in the writer's work through the medium of his personality. According to Hudson, a great book is born of the brain and heart of its author; he has put himself into its pages. Personal experience is the basis of all literature; a great book grows directly out of life. Literature of self-expression includes poetry, prose and criticism written from the personal point of view. And confessional literature is that in which the writer gives vent to his private thoughts without any inhibitions. Thoughts which ordinarily lie dormant or unexpressed within the human heart are brought to the surface daringly with the help of a language that is, at times, shockingly bold and personal.

Eminent writers in their autobiographies have made a clean breast of their past lives with all the frivolities and waywardness of youth. In a way, by confessing all their sins, they tried to exorcise themselves of all their vices by coming face to face with all the demons they had been living with all along. In this manner, by confessing all their follies, they tried to atone for their lapses and reform themselves. Their confessions may be likened to sacramental confessions - made before a priest in order to obtain absolution or to rid oneself of the burden of guilt. Instead of confessing before a priest, writers like St. Augustine, Rousseau and Dequincey chose to make their confession in writing, their motive being the same - to endeavour for a clear conscience.
As a rule, autobiographies are utterly conventional and commonplace. They are of interest only to those readers who are immediately concerned with the author. But some autobiographies show that "when a man pours himself out he can make a supremely human document that is enduring literature."\(^6\) They appeal because the personal element in them has universal application and the reader can easily identify himself with the writer, feel his pain, rejoice in his pleasure and share with him the hope that lies indomitable in the human heart. Among these immortal biographies the work that has the most influence in the intellectual world is The Confessions of St. Augustine (354 - 430 A.D.), written shortly after he became the Bishop of Hippo in his forties. The Confessions record the history of St. Augustine's heart.

Written in the first person, The Confessions of St. Augustine is directly addressed to God. The purpose of the book is three-fold: as an autobiography it is a chronicle of events that took place during the lifetime of St. Augustine; as a book of theology it gives us the writer's impressions of the world and its Creator; and as a philosophical treatise it throws light on St. Augustine's own view of life. The word "confessions" is used by him in a double sense: firstly, it
stands for a simple recounting of guilt. Secondly, it is used as a declaration of faith and belief. In Book 8 of The Confessions St. Augustine narrates how he heard a child's song which inspired him to read The Bible, Chapter XIII, verse 13, an exhortation against drunkenness and lust. Thereupon he became aware of his own failings and resolved to reform himself. In the concluding books St. Augustine reviews his lapses, expresses the doubts that he himself and others have against Christianity and supplies answers to these doubts. He closes with prayers to God from one "who loved Thee late".

In a similar vein we have the Confessions of Rousseau though the religious overtones of St. Augustine's work are missing. Rousseau (1712 - 1773) lacked stability of character and moral principle. He led an erratic life, at times helped by friends and benefactors whose kindness he did not bother to repay, accepting humble posts - even of a footman and music master - he lived with a kitchen maid called Theresa for 25 years. All their five babies were deposited at the Foundling Hospital. This life has been described in his Confessions, written during his most agitated years, from 1765 to 1770 when he suffered poor mental and physical health. It was published posthumously. In this book he discloses not only his own faults and weaknesses but also those of his friends and intimates. The purpose of his confessions was to come face to face with his past, analyse the waywardness and sinfulness of his youth and indirectly
rid himself of the guilt pressing upon his conscience.

A reference may also be made to *The Confessions of an English Opium Eater* by Thomas DeQuincey (1785 - 1859) in which he describes the effect of laudanum on himself. DeQuincey's confessions differ from those of Rousseau and St. Augustine. Whereas St. Augustine and Rousseau actually 'confess' their lapses in their confessions, DeQuincey just studies the effect of a drug that he has taken; he is not 'confessing' a guilt - unless, of course, one considers him guilty of being addicted to a drug. The book has three main sections: autobiographical, apologetic and descriptive of the effects of drug taking. The first part narrates how he took the drug initially to relieve rheumatic pain and found that it not only gave him relief but also stimulated his capacity for enjoyment. The second section describes the pleasures of opium - in the beginning DeQuincey took laudanum once a week but later it became a daily habit. The last section describes the pains of opium in great detail: his brain was haunted by phantoms and nightmares, he suffered from intense gloom and horror. Finally, with a great effort, he managed to pull himself out of this state and gave up this vice out of consideration for his family. The hallucinations, morbid dreams and fears which pervaded his life as an addict are vividly described by DeQuincey. However, even though his
account reads like a first hand report, its authenticity is not established and not accepted by the medical profession. If his Confessions are just a figment of his imagination and not a record of authentic experience then much of the validity is lost.

The purpose behind DeQuincey's confessions is the same as that of St. Augustine and Rousseau - DeQuincey's work carries a moral, pointing out the dangers that may befall one, the temptations that can lead a person astray. A quality common to their works is the therapeutic nature of the confessions. The acknowledgement of sin is half way to atonement; by confessing their follies and foibles these writers aimed at purging themselves of all existent vices within. The desired effect of their confessions could be called cathartic in nature - purging the effects of pent up emotion and repressed thoughts (for example those of guilt, shame, regret) by bringing them to the surface of consciousness.

While comparing the confessions of Augustine, Rousseau and DeQuincey, we see that whereas DeQuincey deals with self-induced private hallucinations, Rousseau with his youthful waywardness and St. Augustine with his attitude towards God, their confessions appeal because they deal basically with man and his response to the stimulus he gets in life. Literature that touches upon such fundamental issues will always have a universal appeal.
The present age is one in which general truths about human nature no longer appeal. What holds the interest of the reader is the personal, subjective experience of man. As Robert Phillips says, "We are living in a great age of autobiography." Writers believe in laying bare their innermost feelings before the reading public. This autobiographical fever is found not only in prose but also in poetry today. The more intimate aspects of life, areas of experience which one would instinctively keep from public sight are openly expressed in verse. In order to appreciate such poetry we must first accept the view that there are no inherently poetic or unpoetic materials - only sensibilities which render materials into poetry. Modern poets like Wallace Stevens believe that nothing is too mundane to provide a base for poetic construction. "Materia poetica" is anything "seen, smelt, touched and understood to be what it is - the flash of a constantly repeated permanence." 

In 1967, James Merril in his Nights and Days said that confessional poetry need not be a true account of the poet's experience; it should just give "the illusion of True Confession." The reader should believe that he is getting the true poet. A similar view was held by the Russian critic, Boris Tomashevsky who declared in 1925 that an autobiographical poem mythologises a poet's life and narrates what should have happened. Rosenthal, who first
used the term "confessional poetry" for the work produced by the poets of the sixties, particularly for the poetry of Robert Lowell, defines confessional poetry as that in which "the private life of the poet himself, especially under stress of psychological crisis, becomes a major theme." Other poets of the sixties who are labelled "confessional" are Anne Sexton, Theodore Roethke, John Berryman and Sylvia Plath. However, M.L. Rosenthal ignores the purpose that lies behind the account of "the private life of the poet" which defies any such simplistic classification.

Confessional poetry did not begin with Robert Lowell. There have always been confessional artists some of whom have been poets. Robert Phillips believes that cavemen drawing pictures of animals they had to kill were also confessional. He says that all confessional art, "whether poetry or not, 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." We have an example of confessional poetry in the work of Chaucer who makes the Wife of Bath boldly condemn celibacy and give an account of her life with five successive husbands. Such uninhibited talk by a woman must have been jolting for the readers of the 14th century, but we must not forget that as early as in the sixth century B.C. Sappho had confessed of losing her maidenhead. Wordsworth
of The Prelude is autobiographical and so, to some extent, is Byron in Don Juan. Even Pope's Epistle to Arbuthnot is subjective. In American poetry, we have Walt Whitman who imparted to his poetry a fresh, personal note, bringing in feelings of tenderness and mourning.

The simplest example of confessional verse is the dramatic monologue perfected by Robert Browning. According to Ben W. Fuson, this form did not originate with Browning; this technique may be found in Catullus, in early Anglo-Saxon literature, in Skelton, More, Daniel, Drayton and Pope. Fuson explains the "interior monolog" as "the dense-textured, sometimes obscure, ironic, tortured, semi-oral semisubconscious mauderlings of an 'I' who is not primarily engaged in communication to an auditor but is preoccupied with his own subliminal spiritual crises ....... A parallel development in prose is the stream of consciousness technique, seen in Proust, Dujardin, Dorothy Richardson, and James Joyce." Just as Browning probes into the mind and heart of his characters, so too the poets of the sixties try and fathom the complexities of the psyche.

In fact, the personal note is sounded by almost all writers, not only by the poets of the sixties of the present century, whether they are poets, dramatists or novelists.
Even poets like T.S. Eliot, in spite of their avowal of "impersonality", raise questions that are shockingly personal. They bring into prominence the discontents of the present civilisation, asking us if we, as individuals, are content with matters as they are or if we would like to "set (our) lands in order" and somehow be redeemed. They seem to be wondering whether or not man can be true to himself in the flux of life. Such questions undoubtedly invite a personal response and relate poetry like Eliot's to that by the so-called confessional poets.

Robert Lowell's *Life Studies*, published in 1959, was as revolutionary as *The Waste Land*, with equally far-reaching effects. Earlier, Lowell had been very popular with the Eliotic school with his complex Roman Catholic symbolism and archaic language. After about a decade of groping about with a style that did not make him feel at home, he finally hit upon a subject and style that suited him — that is, himself. Robert Lowell became his own subject and source of inspiration. The thickly textured Elizabethan-Eliotic language was dropped and a new mode of approaching the reader without any defences or inhibitions was adopted by him. *Life Studies* is his attempt to communicate personal history. Dealing with private emotions without restraint, Lowell reveals his feelings about his youthful non-conformity, his family, his mental illness and so on. His influence on the "confessional school" of poetry cannot be underestimated.
He is the acknowledged spiritual father of Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton. His work struck a new chord in poetry, the reverberations of which will continue to be felt for very long.

Another influence on the confessional poets is Theodore Roethke with his fierce concentration on intensely personal themes. His *The Lost Son and Other Poems* appeared in 1948 but its full impact was felt only after the publication of *Life Studies*. In his work Roethke journeys back into his youth and childhood in order to understand himself as a person. He makes use of Keatsian 'negative capability' in his work. There is a deep personal history involved in his work. It is possible that Lowell, the giant among the confessional poets, was influenced by the work of Roethke and also by the unpublished manuscripts of Anne Sexton and W.D. Snodgrass which he had read. We also know that Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath attended Lowell's poetry classes together in Boston. Hence they picked up a good deal of his poetic ideas and also had considerable influence on each other. Speaking of Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton says, "I suppose I might have shown her something about daring - daring to tell it true. W.D. Snodgrass showed me in the first place. Perhaps he influenced Robert Lowell too ........." Sexton herself denies being influenced by Lowell: "I was writing *To Bedlam and Part Way Back*, the story of my madness,
before *Life Studies* was published. I showed my poems to Mr. Lowell as he was working on his book. Perhaps I even influenced him. [17] Referring to the tremendous influence Roethke had on Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton was not entirely joking when she warned her friend, "If you're not careful, Sylvia, you will out-Roethke Roethke." [18] These examples go to prove that the confessional poets were not only influenced by earlier poets but by each other too.

Before going into further details regarding the work of poets belonging to this genre, it will be worthwhile to examine the main characteristics of this new poetry which came to be accepted with the publication of *Life Studies*, that is, the characteristics found in the works of Robert Lowell, Theodore Roethke, John Berryman, Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath.

To begin with, confessional poetry involves a lot of autobiography. The admissions of fear, guilt, neurosis and failure which are voiced in the poems usually pertain to the poet's own life. In his preface to the 1970 text of *Notebook: 1967-1968* Lowell admits the autobiographical impulse behind his work, that it is "less an almanac than the story of (his) life." The basis of *Life Studies*, too, is his own life history and the lives of his family members - his uncle, parents, grandparents, wife and daughter. The unifying factor is his own mind which reviews the past from
an intensely personal perspective. Events and people are described in relation to himself. It is the poet's conscious being which journeys into the past.

Similarly, in the work of the other confessional poets we have personal history, experiences and events that have left an impression on the mind of the author. However, this does not mean that the confessional poet is merely concerned with giving autobiographical facts. Robert Lowell, referring to the poems of *Life Studies*, says, "They are not always factually true. There's a good deal of tinkering with fact. You leave out a lot, and emphasize this and not that ....... I've invented facts and changed things...... So, there's a lot of artistry, I hope, in the poems. Yet ...... there was always that standard of truth which you wouldn't ordinarily have in poetry - the reader was to believe he was getting the real Robert Lowell."19 This is the maxim adopted by the other confessional poets too. They speak of facts from autobiography but these facts are not presented as a mere case history. Often facts undergo subtle changes as the poet tinkers with them, weaving into them a mythic pattern yet, at the same time, retaining the effect of authenticity. Confessional poetry, were it mere confession, would be just a sob-statement of personal trials and tribulations, holding little interest for the reader. In order to avoid this, the confessional poets make use of a persona. It is often a mythic self they speak of.
The poet is represented by an actor who performs on his behalf. The 'I' of the poems is not the factual 'I' of the poet but a projection of the poet's being into another person. The purpose of this mask is to achieve a degree of objectivity which is not possible if the poet keeps his own self as the centre of his poems. As Oscar Wilde says, "Man is least himself when he talks in his own person. Give him a mask and he will tell you the truth." Nietzsche feels the same when he says, "Every profound spirit needs a mask."20

The mythic method employed by the confessional poets is not merely a poetic device; it is used in order to impart depth to the poetry. As stated earlier, there are elements of fancy along with autobiographical facts. For example, we read of Anne Sexton's brother who was killed in the war. However, the poet had no brother, her imaginary character being just an expression of her unconscious mind.21 Again, in "Unknown Girl in the Maternity Ward" she speaks of one who gives birth to an illegitimate child. Much to the amusement of Sexton, this poem has led many critics to speculate whether she herself had any illegitimate children. Similarly, Berryman narrates his own life history as that of an imaginary character called Henry. Though Berryman himself insists that Henry is a purely imaginary character, yet the parallels between his own life and that of Henry are
so strong that they cannot be dismissed as merely coincidental. Thus, to sum up, it could be said that confessional poetry is autobiography disguised, presented through a mask.

The confessional poets seem determined in their pursuit of the truth, no matter how terrible. In this respect a reference may be made to Anne Sexton's epigraph to To Bedlam and Part Way Back which is a quotation from a letter from Schopenhauer to Goethe:

"It is the courage to make a clean breast of it in the face of every question that makes a philosopher. He must be like Sophocles' Oedipus who, seeking enlightenment concerning his terrible fate, pursues his indefatigable inquiry, even when he divines that appalling horror awaits him in the answer. But most of us carry in our hearts the Jocasta who begs Oedipus not to enquire further."

The confessional poets write poems that are candid, honest and down-to-earth. The emotions portrayed by them are true to their own feelings and their opinions are born of sincere personal conviction, not current literary fashion. There is an openness of emotion, not a veiling of it, and the recesses of the mind are laid bare. "Poetry milks the unconscious," says Anne Sexton. The epigraph to her second book (a quotation from Kafka's letter to Oscar Pollak) says, "A book should serve as an axe for the frozen sea within us."
Other confessional poets seem to agree. The work of Lowell, Roethke, Plath and Berryman seems to be an effort to thaw out the frozen emotions within them. Roethke views art as a kind of fishing "patiently, in the dark pond, the unconscious" or a diving in "to come up festooned with dead cats, weeds, tin cans, and other fascinating debris." This is also the technique of Ted Hughes who, though not included with the confessional poets, believes in allowing his innermost emotions to rise to the surface. An acquaintance recalls how he once described the process of writing: "He sank a shaft into the deepest part of himself and stood aside so to speak, and let the words, the matter, rise up. It was .......... the process of fishing the unconscious."23

The subjects of confessional poets are far from beautiful. What inspire them most are domestic, intimate themes. There are no restrictions on subject matter; material hitherto considered 'unpoetic' is glorified by them. And places which evoke poetic vision are as ordinary as a hospital, an operation theatre, a baggage room or a mental asylum. Often the subjects are absurd: for example, Plath writes of "Face Lift", "Thalidomide", "Cut", and "Contusion"; Roethke writes "Lines on leaving a Sanitorium" and "Meditations in Hydrotherapy"; Anne Sexton writes "In Celebration of My Uterus" and "Ballad of the Lonely Mas-turbator". For this reason Robert Phillips refers to confessional poetry as an "anti-elegant mode".24
Phillips also says that "whereas the poets of the 1930s and 1940s consciously strove for universality through the invocation of mythological and psychological archetypes, the confessional poets of the 1960s and 1970s achieve the same end through 'personalization' - the Self and family history." However, this view is not absolutely correct; there is no doubt that the self and mind of the poet is important in confessional poetry, but emotion is portrayed in such a manner as to be universally applicable. And, contrary to Phillips' contention, the universalization of experience is through mythical and psychological archetypes. This aspect of confessional poetry is often overlooked because the mythic patterns adopted by the poets are not superimposed on the poetry. Generally a private myth is described, with its roots not only in personal history but in the history of mankind itself, thereby elevating the private into the universal. So the reader, instead of feeling that he has intruded upon private ground, can identify himself with the poet. The chaos which a Lowell or a Roethke perceives in his mind is given a wide applicability. As A. Alvarez says, the best modern artists have invented out of their private tribulations a public language; they survive by becoming something their audience can share. Similarly, public horrors are converted into private and felt as intensely as though the poet's own self were suffering. This is how Sylvia Plath feels about the persecution of Jews and the
horrors of the atom bomb. Her feelings are comparable to the grief of Ginsberg, felt on the personal level, on perceiving "the best minds of (his) generation destroyed by madness." Similarly, Berryman's early poems are a subjective response to the objective reality of a dismal world. His reaction is to take the burden of the world on himself, just as Lowell does.

A recurring theme in confessional poetry is mental illness. Robert Lowell describes his return from a mental asylum (in "Home After Three months Away"); Anne Sexton's To Bedlam and Part Way Back deals with her own madness and partial recovery; Sylvia Plath's The Bell Jar is a controlled and compelling account of the author's mental breakdown and subsequent electro-convulsive treatment and psychotherapy. There are references to the same breakdown in her poems, too. In fact, the theme of madness is so common that the confessional poets have been called "The Madhouse Muses", says Robert Phillips. But madness is not depicted as an abnormal affliction; in fact, it is spoken of in terms of glorification. Says Roethke, "What's madness but nobility of the soul / At odds with circumstance?" ("In a Dark Time").

This mental affliction is often accompanied by a father-complex. Lowell speaks of his father's public failure - his financial burst; Sexton's mention of her father has
incestuous overtones; Berryman mourns the suicide of his father; Roethke's quest for identity seems to revolve around his father whose ghost haunts him at every step (as in "The Wall"). But nowhere does the father-complex find as much prominence as in the work of Sylvia Plath. In almost all her later poems and in some earlier ones, too, her deceased father is referred to as a presence which haunts her continuously. The "Bee Poems" are an invocation of her father who was an authority on bumblebees; in "Daddy" she conjures up his ghost in order to 'exorcise' herself of him.

Allied to this father-complex is a sense of failure - failure in love, in marriage, in career. Lowell speaks of "The Woe that is in Marriage"; his only poem about his wife ("Man and Wife") depicts them both lying in "Mother's bed" but they are "tamed by Miltown". Even though this poem is often taken to be a love poem, the husband and the wife are kept apart by the mother's unseen presence and by the effect of the tranquilizer. Sylvia Plath, too, speaks of the failure of marriage (marriage which "brainwashes" a person, as Esther Greenwood says). The rift between man and wife is described in "Event". The disillusionment brought by marriage is also referred to in "The Couriers": "A ring of gold with the sun in it? / Lies. Lies and a grief."
The sense of failure leads to an alienation of the poet from the rest of the world. The rift between the poet and the world seems to be such as cannot be bridged by any human being, be it a father, mother, wife, husband or child. Not only Sylvia Plath but the other confessional poets, too, seem to be enclosed in a "bell jar", alienated from the world. Left alone to probe the realities of their own soul, they try and locate their true self. "Which I is I?" cries Roethke in "In a Dark Time". This quest for an identity and self-probing of the poets exposes to the public their frayed nerves. But portrayal of frayed nerves is by no means confined to the poets of the 1960s. T.S.Eliot was doing the same thing when he spoke of a magic lantern throwing Prufrock's nerves in patterns on a screen.

The theme of suicide and death seems to be an obsession with the confessional poets. Usually it is the death of a dear one that is mourned - of a father, more often than not, sometimes a friend. Roethke, Berryman and Plath lament the loss of their respective fathers, Lowell speaks of the deaths of his uncle, grandfather and mother. Often, the person being mourned is a close friend: Anne Sexton mourns the deaths of Sylvia Plath and John Holmes; Lowell dedicates four poems in Life Studies to Ford Madox Ford, George Santayana, Delmore Schwartz and Hart Crane; Berryman is cross with God who has
taken away Roethke, Blackmur, Randall Jarrell, Schwartz and Plath.

"Dying
Is an art, like everything else
I do it exceptionally well"
says Sylvia Plath in "Lady Lazarus". The idea of dying is so attractive that Plath and Sexton often think of self-destruction. Anne Sexton refers to herself and her friend, Sylvia Plath as "death mongers": "We talked death with burned-up intensity, both of us drawn to it like moths to an electric light bulb. Sucking on it!" She gives the reasons for this fascination with death - which "may seem strange, even sick, to others" - in what she calls her "why-poem", "Wanting to Die":

"........suicides have a special language.
Like carpenters they want to know which tools.
They never ask why build."

Robert Phillips says that the goal of confessional poetry is self therapy and purgation; confessional poets give to the public those outpourings previously reserved for the father confessor or the analyst. Accordingly to Thurley, in the absence of the natural self of the English and the support of the church, the confessional poets of America turned to Freud who became their God. He believes that what is analysed in confessional poetry is not the true self but a conventionalised Freudian version of the self.
and confessional poetry is like "a session with an analyst," not a facing of reality. Though this view may sound unsympathetic, it is, nevertheless true that a knowledge of psychoanalysis will greatly enhance the reader's appreciation of confessional poetry. A small example in this context would be Anne Sexton's "The Moss of His Skin", a dramatic monologue inspired by an article in a psychoanalytical journal which spoke of young girls in Arabia often being buried alive next to their dead fathers as sacrifice to the Goddess of the tribe. The poem is a phantasy, describing the experience, explaining the complex female need not only to share the father with the mother but also to share the mother with the father.

A. Alvarez refers to confessional poetry as "extremist art" that has more in common with psychoanalysis. He says that if surrealists are concerned with the wit and whimsicality of the unconscious, extremist art is committed to a stage below this - before the "dream work" begins. Among the leading exponents of this style are Lowell, Plath and Berryman. Robert Lowell turned from the complex symbolism of his earlier work to face the chaos within himself in Life Studies. John Berryman turned from the public world of Homage to Mistress Bradstreet to the more intimate cycle of Dream Songs. Sylvia Plath's dissatisfaction with
her earlier self-conscious style, says Alvarez, coincided with the publication of *Life Studies* which gave her

"the excuse she had been waiting for, the key to unlock the reserves of pain which had built up steadily since her father's premature death when she was a child and her own suicide attempt at the age of twenty. In the mass of brilliant poems which she poured out in the last few months of her life she took Lowell's example to its logical conclusion, systematically exploring the nexus of anger, guilt, rejection, love and destructiveness which made her finally take her own life." 31

Extremists, says Alvarez, believe in the necessity or risk. Handling such "volatile" material (like death, suicide, mental breakdown) can prove a one-way road and the artist may find himself testing out his own death and vulnerability on himself.

"If I pay the roots of heather Too close attention, they will invite me To whiten my bones among them,"

says Sylvia Plath, well aware of the risk she took in her choice of material. Such public exposures have their risks. It is often pointed out that all the confessional poets of the sixties suffered a nervous breakdown at some time or the other. Sylvia Plath, John Berryman and Anne Sexton committed suicide. However, what became of these poets in real life should not bias one's opinion of their
work lest one is left incapable of understanding why these poets have been recipients of prestigious awards like the Pulitzer and the National Book Award. One must accept, with Álvarez, that these poets were determined to confront the intimations of mortality, not immortality, and this determination is finally what distinguishes advanced art from the fashionable crowd of avantgardes.
NOTES TO CHAPTER ONE


5. Hudson classifies literature into three divisions: (i) the literature of self-expression like poetry, essay, treatise written from the personal point of view and the literature of artistic and literary criticism; (ii) literature depicting the world of external human life. This includes history, biography, ballads, the story, the novel, and drama; (iii) Literature of description, e.g., books on travel, essays and prose. Here we are concerned with the first category, that is, that written from the personal point of view.


7. St. Augustine recalls the carnal corruptions of his youth, how he wasted the first sixteen years of his life unaware
of the sins he committed. From the age of 17 to 19 he lived in "a cauldron of unholy loves" at Carthage; then he took a mistress for 15 years.


14. The Confessional Poets, p.3.


21. In The Confessional Poets, p.11, Robert Phillips refers to Jung's "animus" to explain this point, that is, the personification of the feminine nature of a man's unconscious and the masculine nature of a woman's which manifest themselves in the form of figures in dreams and fantasies. This explains Anne Sexton's make-believe brother.


25. Ibid., p.16.


27. *The Confessional Poets*, p.15


30. *The Savage God*, p.214

31. Ibid., p.216.

32. Ibid., p.218.