The College at Brockport: State University of New York
Digital Commons @Brockport

English Master's Theses | English

5-12-2007

Making Confessions: The Confessional Voice Found Among Literary Genres

Mary Beth Harrod
The College at Brockport

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.brockport.edu/eng_theses

Part of the Poetry Commons

Repository Citation
Harrod, Mary Beth, "Making Confessions: The Confessional Voice Found Among Literary Genres" (2007). *English Master's Theses*. 36.
http://digitalcommons.brockport.edu/eng_theses/36

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the English at Digital Commons @Brockport. It has been accepted for inclusion in English Master's Theses by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @Brockport. For more information, please contact kmyers@brockport.edu.

Making Confessions: The Confessional Voice Found Among Literary Genres

by

Mary Beth Harrod

A thesis submitted to the Department of English of the State University of New York

College at Brockport, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

May 12, 2007

Making Confessions: The Confessional Voice Found Among Literary Genres

by Mary Beth-Harrod

Approved: ______________________ 5/21/07

Advisor date

______________________ 5/22/07

Reader

______________________ 6/14/07

Reader

______________________ 5-21-07

Coordinator, Graduate Committee

______________________ 6-14-07

Chair, Department of English

Abstract

This graduate thesis will explore the term "confessional" and its application to literature. The term "confessional" varies; confessional writing can take different forms in different genres. In this thesis, works by contemporary authors of personal lyric poetry, memoir, and fiction are discussed and an investigation of confessional writing within their work is undertaken. While not all authors use a direct confessional voice, the overall effect of their writing creates an intimate space between the writer and reader. A sense of self-reflection on the part of the author gives a confessional feel to his or her work.

While the lines of literary conventions separate genres, confessional writing tends to blur those lines by bringing the message of the work to the forefront. A piece of literature said to be of a particular genre is challenged when one discovers a confessional voice, as it weaves itself among genres and changes the face of the genre itself. While the confessional voice may be less pronounced in fiction, when we think we hear it speaking, albeit unconsciously on the part of the writer, the same effect takes place: writer and reader become engaged in a communicative relationship that reveals secrets of the heart.

In exploring personal lyric poetry and memoir of Gregory Orr, personal lyric poetry of Linda Gregerson and Frank Bidart, short stories and essays by Susan Sontag, and finally, the short stories, essays, and letters of Flannery O'Connor, confessional writing proves to be ambiguous in meaning and difficult to define; nevertheless, each author uniquely incorporates varying degrees of confessionalism to achieve a sense of intimacy that is not a result of the genre they are working in, but in how they say what they do within the genre they have chosen to write in.

Table of Contents

Chapter One: Introduction.. 1

Chapter Two: The Transformative Powers of Confessionalism............ 9

Chapter Three: The Contract of Confessionalism.............................. 22

Chapter Four: Reflection and Narration in Sontag's Work................. 38

Chapter Five: Flannery O'Connor's Resistance to Confessionalism......... 49

Chapter Six: Conclusion.. 62

Works Cited... 68

Chapter One: Introduction

The term "confessional," when applied to literature, has been known for just under fifty years, a fairly new term when considered among the depths of literary history. Critic M.L. Rosenthal first used the term to describe the poetry of Robert Lowell in a 1959 review of his book *Life Studies.* Rosenthal says, "Because of the way Lowell brought his private humiliations, sufferings, and psychological problems into the poems of *Life Studies*, the word 'confessional' seemed appropriate enough" (The New Poets 26). Given the short time span between the term's introduction into literature and its present use in describing literature today, it is still subject to many debates and discussions among those who subscribe to confessional literature.

In the Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory, there are three entries that begin with the literary term "confessional." Under "confessional literature," the definition begins, "*Into this rather vague category* [italics mine] we may place works that are a very personal and subjective account of experiences, beliefs, feelings, and states of mind, body and soul" (174). The definition of the "confessional novel" states:

> A rather *misleading and flexible term* [it. mine] which suggests an 'autobiographical' type of fiction, written in the first-person, and which, on the face of it, is a self-revelation. On the other hand, it may not be, though it looks like it. The author may be merely assuming the role of another character.... In the last fifty years this type of novel has been common. (174)

And finally, next to "confessional poetry," it reads:

> It *may be argued that* (it. mine) much poetry, especially lyric poetry, is, *ipso facto*, 'confessional' in so far as it is a record of a poet's states of mind and feelings and his vision of life.... However, some poems are more overtly self-revelatory, more detailed in their analytical exposition of pain, grief, tension and joy. (175)

With each definition, the term "confessional" seems ambiguous; while it is attempted, there is no definitive description of confessional writing. And yet, in contemporary literature today, the reader is finding work that is quite confessional—literature that belongs to a narrator who wants to tell a story, his or her own story, pieces of the story or all of it. In its own loosely definable category, how does confessional writing find its place among genres and what does it do to the genre it is working in?

Poets such as Robert Lowell, Theodore Roethke, Sylyia Plath, Anne Sexton, and John Barryman were among the first group of well-known "confessional" writers. In Rosenthal's book *The New Poets* (1976), he wants "to propose that since the war of 1939-1945 the most striking poetry in the English language has taken on a new coloration, ... in effect a new sense of unease and disorder ... a heart-heavy realization that remorseless brutality is a condition not only of the physical universe but also of man himself" (5). The confessional poets were thought to be struggling with an internal unrest that was a result of the global and national unrest of the times. Their poetics were also seen as influenced by the Romantic tradition of lyric writing where personal experience is relevant. In the article "The Making of a Confessional Poetic," Steven K. Hoffman says that the "wide range of individual styles and talents represented [among the confessional poets] make up a distinct historical movement firmly rooted in both the Romantic and modern traditions"

where the poem centers around the self (688). Rosenthal describes confessional poetry as "embodying the issues of cultural crisis in the crises of the poet's own life" (97-8). The self becomes the center of the poem as his or her sufferings supply the poet with the language and thematic elements. In the article "Anne Sexton and Confessional Poetics" (2004), Jo Gill extracts the "defining features of 'confessional' writing" as evidenced by Rosenthal's review of Lowell's *Life Studies*. The features of the new poetry "is understood to be primarily therapeutic in intent and effect ('soul's therapy' and 'self-therapeutic'), autobiographical ('Lowell's speaker is 'unequivocally himself') and truthful (it features uncompromising honesty')" (427). What becomes problematic is the critic's or reader's interpretation of the work as confessional and the author's actual claim. As argued in Gill's article, while Sexton acknowledged being labeled a 'confessional' poet, there was uneasiness on her part as a poet that "the label does not quite fit, that her work transgresses or exceeds the limits of the mode" (426). Perhaps this is a result of "limits of the mode" that are not fully apprehended.

While the term "confessional" was first applied to poetry, I will argue that narratives of American contemporary literature often feel confessional to the reader, creating a sense of intimacy between writer and reader that overshadows the categorical literary genres authors are writing in. Sontag asks in her essay, "Where the Stress Falls," "Is this frenetic reflectiveness distinctively American?" (15). The literary genre is a vehicle for the confessional narrative; the narrative drives the vehicle to places of personal exploration that in turn cause the reader to look within his or herself as well. It is not *how one gets* (genre) to his or her personal metaphoric destination, but what one *experiences* and *communicates* en route (confessional narrative) that is enjoyed and

remembered. I will look at selected works from contemporary authors Gregory Orr, Linda Gregerson, Frank Bidart, Susan Sontag and Flannery O'Connor. Each is writing in a particular genre, but the confessional voice (obvious or ambiguous), provides each writer a more imaginative (while experience based) working space.

Just as we saw three varying definitions of what "confessional" means when applied to literature, my own definitions and ideas of confessional writing will shift from author to author. While not every author writes overtly confessional pieces, their work forms personal connections, leaving the reader as feeling directly spoken to.

I will look at Gregory Orr's personal lyric poetry from The Caged Owl (2002) and his memoir, The Blessing (2002). Both works revolve around the shooting and killing of Orr's younger brother in a hunting accident of which Orr was tragically involved—he pulled the trigger. In his book Poetry as Survival (2002), Orr discusses the transformative powers of the personal lyric. In writing personal poetry about personal experiences, Orr argues for the honest expression of writing to alleviate human suffering and communicate human joy. Confessing one's desires, one's pains, one's perceived "sins" against the world and others is a way to release the self from personal pain and bondage, thus creating a new self in the wake of trauma. Orr is arguably the most honest and aware of his confessional narrative, thus I will begin with his work. He recognizes it, embraces it, and encourages it. Orr's confessional voice is direct, as his personal experiences beg to be told and reconciled.

Like Gregory Orr, Linda Gregerson's poems employ a confessional voice as well. While much of Orr's poetry speaks of pain and transformation, Gregerson has a broader scope. Nevertheless, she writes a fair share about the dark side of humanity. She

masterfully integrates personal human experiences with the universal in collections her Waterborne (2002) and The Woman Who Died in Her Sleep (1996). Her own personal experiences are juxtaposed with history and experiences of other human beings across the globe based on news reports, historical documents, and external media (photographs, sculpture), illustrating an undeniable connecting universality that are not escaped, or erased with place or time. The confessional narratives found within her poetry serve to illustrate her own experiences as a pebble in the sand, blurring the boundaries that history and geography have placed on humanity. While Orr's confessional voice serves to heal the broken self, Gregerson's confessional voice serves to question what breaks us in the first place and why? I will also compare and contrast Gregerson's poetry with her contemporary, Frank Bidart. Bidart argues for an examination of one's own life for literary merit. He posits that while the great epics of literature cannot be reproduced or again achieved, he must turn to his own personal experiences, questions, and searches for meaning, to become the catalyst and substance of his writing. Selected poems of Bidart's are found in The Sacrifice (1979), and The New Bread Loaf Anthology of Contemporary American Poetry (1999).

In looking at fiction, I will examine some of the short stories of Susan Sontag from her collection I, Etcetera (1978) and her novel In America (2000). I will argue for the unconscious confessional vein running through these short stories by way of her complex characters who often present a duality of self—the real self and the expression of self. What does this duality imply about the author as narrator and any "confessing" that may be happening in the narration? Sontag's narratives are less explicit; the confessional voice is more textually layered than what one finds reading a memoir or

personal lyric poem. Fiction demands that the self be somewhat removed. Despite the author's reticence in recognizing her own confessionalism, I will argue for its presence in some of her fiction as the "unconscious urge" behind her writing. I will also look at several of her essays from her collection Where the Stress Falls (2001) in which she speaks about autobiographical writing, and her essay "Against Interpretation" (1961) which laments the critique of content in art, rather than a focus on artistic form. At times, Sontag's essays seemingly contradict her assessment of her own writing. She acknowledges personal relevance in her work, yet also acknowledges that writing can be an escape from the self, standing alone as art.

Investigating a form of anti-confessionalism, I will look at the letters and fiction of Flannery O'Connor: the contemporary Southern writer who vehemently admonished her critics for relentlessly trying to extract autobiographical information from her stories. I will examine her letters in the collection The Habit of Being (1980), some of her essays, and short stories from the collection A Good Man is Hard to Find (1955). O'Connor's fiction holds a justification for exploration into possible confessionalism when examined under the light shed by her letters. While she greatly resisted this kind of criticism and investigation of her work, she admits in some of her letters to lending some of her own experiences to her stories. Why, then, does O'Connor persist so in repudiating her critics who determinedly hang onto the autobiographical traces in her fiction? Why does she resist it? Perhaps because the traces of confessionalism in O'Connor's work do not stand alone; they only become apparent when one knows a little something about O'Connor's life, which for her, is besides the point. What are the implications for a critic asking autobiographical questions of art?

While confessional writing has been historically equated with autobiography, with the likes of Augustine's *Confessions* of 400 AD and Rousseau's fully formulated *Confessions* of 1782 (Bleakely 17), the confessional narrative of today works within diverse genres to leave the reader with an overwhelmingly shared human experience. In the range of literary genres available to contemporary writers and readers, there is more room for, and acceptance of confessional writing. It is my belief that as a result, the literary experience is not exclusively determined by the genre the writer is working in; the emphasis is placed on the ideas and experiences communicated between writer and reader through a confessional narrative. The walls of genre are scaled by a narrative confessional voice.

While memorable literature is grounded or based in a literary genre (poetry, fiction, memoir, etc.), it is a confessional voice that speaks to us, transforms us, renews us, and attempts order. The confessional voice is trying to position itself among the ordered world when disorder feels suffocating and impenetrable. Alan Bleakely posits, "the personal-confessional narrative (as a specific variant of autobiography) is offered as a revelation of an individual's interiority [...] where identities are constructed through confessional modes, rather than confessional modes revealing identities" (16). It is in the act of confessing that one constructs identity. And in listening to the confessional voice, as reader, one may experience his or her own self-revelation in the recognition and mirroring of shared human experiences. Gregory Orr says of the poet, which can be arguably said for all writers using a confessional voice, "The poet is not simply writing poem after poem in order to survive but is embarked on a project of inner exploration that

will benefit others as well. When the poet 'thinks into the human heart,' (Keats) he is adding to what we all know about ourselves" (Poetry as Survival 158).

In discussing the confessional narrative as working within the boundaries of genre, it is necessary to examine the different nuances to the confessional voice and the impact on the various genres. Bleakely states, "Where writing appears to spontaneously, and sometimes alarmingly, 'reveal' something of oneself to oneself therapeutically, perhaps this is rather an effect of a shift in genre, or register, of writing itself, that heals the standard of dominant fictional form" (19). Literature being written by our American contemporaries is becoming increasingly difficult to categorize as a result of a confessional voice. Confessional writing may prompt the questions: Is it memoir? Is it creative non-fiction? Is it personal lyric poetry? Is it fiction?

Contemporary writers are being accused of challenging genre: mixing and borrowing genres to produce works of literature that problematize categorizing; the confessional voice complicates categorizing. Bleakely observes, "Narrative knowing is an aesthetic apprehension offered through a variety of genres and their admixtures…" (12). As the term confessional is described to be "vague," "misleading," and "flexible" according to definitions, it is my belief that an investigation into literature that feels confessional to the reader will provide a greater appreciation for the expression of literature, the transformative powers it holds, and the relationship that can develop between writers and readers. "[T]he confessional mode of humanistic therapy has its root in puritan notions of cleansing and purging…" (Bleakely 20). A confessional voice may lead to a clearer idea of the self.

Chapter Two: The Transformative Powers of Confessionalism

In the article, "Production of the Self During the Age of Confessionalism" (2001), David Warren Sabean leads us through some of the history of confessionalism as a religious practice that allowed one a clearer view of the self. While Sabean is arguing for a production of the self, Gregory Orr, poet and memoirist, argues for a *re*production of the self after trauma has destroyed the previously known self. Sabean explains confessionalism as centered around the act of remembrance. "Remembrance is seen as an exercise which has the power to integrate the person into a unity in faith and good works. In this way, the Sacrament is a reminder, or a marker, or a stimulant" (4). Orr, too, uses remembrance as a powerful tool to confess his innermost personal feelings surrounding the strained relationship with his father, the death of his mother, and, more upsetting and quite horrific, the hunting accident that ended his younger brother Peter's life when Orr, as a boy himself, accidentally shot him dead. Orr's confessional mode recreates the self so that he may find meaning for his existence.

Sabean describes the Puritans' belief of memory as holding regenerative abilities for the self. He says:

> [T]he Puritans ... saw memory tied to moments of regeneration, the self being recreated, regenerated, destroyed, and refashioned. In a very real way, a person traversed a series of points which marked discontinuities of the self. The exercises developed.... parsed the doctrine of sanctification in such a way as to think of memory as the core around which a consistent, unitary, but slowly reformed personality could be constructed. Such a self

> unfolded in an internal dialogue with itself, abstracted from relations with its fellows. (17)

I will explore the ways in which Orr too, slowly reforms his personality through the confessional mode of the personal lyric. In the essay, "Gregory Orr: Resources of the Personal Lyric" (2003), Hank Lazer sees Orr's lyric as setting forth "a version of health and value that proceeds on the basis of individually achieved expressions and realizations" (51): Health and value emerge as transformation after the pain and sorrow of tragedy.

While memory is critical in self-transformation, Sabean also points out that, "[T]he Puritans seem to rely on a mechanism of forgetting, an act of purging, by which sins are recalled to memory and then expunged" (15). The act of confession preceding partaking in the Lord's Supper, (or the Sacrament of Communion), is seen as a way to forget. Remembrance is necessary for confession and once confessed, one is able to forget and proceed in the production of self. "For the Puritans, it appears that remembering and forgetting are much more closely linked together" than one would think (Sabean 15).

Sabean recalls "Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment exercises which schooled individuals to develop the self in a series of internal dialogues with its past" and the power of smell was invoked as awakening the memory (5). In Orr's poem, "Gathering the Bones Together," written for Peter Orr, his deceased brother, he recalls that life-changing day and the unmistakable odor that helps to distinguish it. He writes in section four of the poem, titled "Smoke":

> Something has covered the chimney

and the whole house fills with smoke.

I go outside and look up at the roof,

but I can't see anything.

I go back inside. Everyone weeps,

walking from room to room.

Their eyes ache. This smoke

turns people into shadows.

Even after it is gone

and the tears are gone,

we will smell it in pillows

when we lie down to sleep. (84)

The power of smell is critical in the act of remembering. Smells linger in the air; they accompany experiences and become an active part of the experience itself as they set the groundwork for remembrance. The smell of smoke will haunt Orr for the rest of his life; it will not allow him to forget the day he shot his brother. The act of sleeping, lying in a state of unconsciousness, is interrupted when the smell of smoke in the pillows rouses Orr to remember the event that shattered his known world and his self-image. It is in this smell that Orr will continue to recall and confront a struggle with his self. When he lies down to forget, the smell of smoke will yoke him to remembrance.

In his book, Poetry As Survival (2001), Orr argues for the creative process of writing to release inner demons that threaten to strangle the soul, one's selfhood. He says, "We are creatures whose volatile inner lives are both mysterious to us and beyond our control. How to respond to the strangeness and unpredictability of our own emotional

being? Our important answer to this question is the personal lyric, the 'I' poem dramatizing inner and outer experience" (4). Orr recognizes the need to confess one's inner life as a way to reconcile the mystery of our selfhood. Orr's understanding closely follows that of Michele Foucault's understanding of the confessional process. As quoted in an essay by Jo Gill, Foucault says of the process:

> [It is] a ritual in which expression alone, independently of its external consequences, produces intrinsic modifications in the person who articulates it: it exonerates, and purifies him; it unburdens him of his wrongs, liberates him, and promises salvation. (432)

The self cannot begin to heal, or begin the process of transformation, unless the self participates in an internal dialogue. Expression of this dialogue allows one's innermost thoughts to be revealed. In Orr's poem, "Screaming Out Loud," the transformed self writes to the self that was destroyed as a result of experiences that defy understanding. In this instance Orr abandons the "I" as he struggles to reconcile two selves: the one that could not talk about his internal state of being and the one that is finding healing in self-expression. The "I" is implicit, however, as Orr is essentially talking to himself about himself. He writes:

> Before, you curled inward
> around hurts and scars;
> braille of battles
> seldom won; fissures
> and wristroads
> a razor made..

Stutter

from tongue-stump

unable to utter

its woe.

Still,

your body was mostly

intact, and you

told yourself:

I'm a lucky husk.

And now, you're shattered,

hurtled outward:

shrapnel of stars

and a weird music:

bone in the wind's throat. (8)

One can see the transformation Orr is writing out for himself. As he "curled inward / around hurts and scars … unable to utter / its woe" (ll.1-2, 9-10), the self was struggling to survive and make meaning of existence. At the poem's end, he is "hurtled outward," "shattered" and exposed, but nonetheless working toward recreation, able to "dramatize inner and outer experience."

In Orr's personal lyric poetry, remembrance and forgetting are linked as Orr begins a healing transformation. Orr remembers the events that birthed his inner demons;

he is compelled to confess to them. In confessing, expunging, he can begin to forget the self torn asunder by trauma, and forge a new self. Orr says in Poetry As Survival, "By making such a dramatized, expressive model of its crisis, the self is able to acknowledge the existence, nature, and power of what is destabilizing it, while at the same time asserting its ultimate mastery over the disordering by the power of its linguistic and imaginative orderings" (22). In acknowledging the existence of the crisis, one must find its source of destabilization. This requires remembrance. In asserting mastery over disorder by "linguistic and imaginative orderings," one forgets, or abandons, the shattered self in order to recreate. For Orr, writing poems about the destabilizing experiences that create crises, allow him to remember his pain, but also to forget the experience as life-shattering, because in writing, he is able to transform disorder into order. The experience is no longer destabilizing, but life-giving. In his essay "Bearing Sorrow" (2003), Floyd Skloot writes, "... harrowing autobiographical details have always informed [Orr's] work ... Over time, ... he moved from a direct confrontation with his haunting materials through a search for transformative metaphor to a place of simple acceptance" (220).

In his poem titled "October," Orr recognizes the connection between recalling the past and exposing the self to arrive someplace altogether new. He says in the first stanza:

> At my feet the stream flows backwards,
>
> a road through the hills.
>
> But to travel it I would have to be naked,
>
> more naked than I have ever been. (ll.1-4, 76)

And later in the second stanza he echoes the fear of exposure, "I am afraid of the woods in daylight, / the colors demanding I feel" (ll.6-7). Although Orr ultimately sees the need

to confess his feelings and communicate what is haunting him, it is quite scary and difficult to confront one's self with what it fears. Orr writes, " 'I must face this fear', I think, / and struggle to stay in my body" (ll.10-11) Recalling the past conjures sights, sounds, and smells of what we long to forget. But we are only able to forget and leave behind the shattered self after recollection and expulsion through a confession. Orr cannot hope to forget the traumatic events, but he can hope to forget the self paralyzed by trauma.

While Orr's personal lyric poetry is an ordering of thoughts, the poems themselves are also filled with a rage that reverberates in the white space of the page. In this regard, Orr's personal confessions blend together the Puritan and Lutheran differences expressed in their religious confessions. Unlike the Puritans who "lay stress on ordering thoughts and examining individual motivations and acts," the Lutherans "developed practices for overriding illicit thoughts with noisy piety" (Sabean 16). The Lutherans believed that one should learn to meet the attack of evil thoughts with defensive prayers, "crying from the heart and groaning from the soul" (Sabean 16). Orr's lyric poetry is indeed a "crying from the heart." In "Tin Cup," he writes:

> Here's a tin cup
>
> Furred with rust.
>
> Here's a bad heart
>
> I've lugged this far. (ll.1-4, 9)

Much of Orr's poetry is filled with allusions to screams, a more desperate attempt of defense than crying and groaning. In "October" he writes, "[B]ut the scream comes, the scream / that is like my hands / only larger, like two wings of ice" (ll.12-14, 76). And

there is the poem mentioned earlier, "Screaming Out Loud" (8). The scream that Orr includes in his poetry is both a primal reaction to the horror he witnessed and a proactive attempt to express the overwhelming agony he experiences. It is both a response and a manifestation. In "October," it is the scream of remembrance. Orr recalls the literal scream projected out of his mouth after realizing he shot his brother. It is Orr's response. Ironically, in "Screaming Out Loud," the scream calls him to confront his past; it is the figurative scream of defense crying out; it is the manifested scream that is the beginning of Orr's transformation.

Orr's inclusion and repetition of screams is in his hope that "something lucid and wonderful could be made out of dismaying personal material" (Poetry As Survival 27). For the religious, the Sacrament of Confession is just that. What is wonderful is being able to participate in Holy Communion, the Lord's Supper. However, it can only be enjoyed after revealing personal material that is indeed dismaying. In his poem, "Some Part of the Lyric" (16), Orr discusses the "the lyric's urge to exclude / what hurts us" (ll.6-7). He says, "Some part of the lyric wants to exclude / the world with all its chaos and grief" (ll.1-2). Yet, Orr argues that the lyric can be a safe response to the chaotic world. It is a coping mechanism filled with metaphor, simile, and the rhythmic flow of beautiful language, words chosen carefully for their sensuous impressions. Without the confession of what is wrong, one may not realize what is right. The lyric poem is "something we can use ... only as long as its beauty ... reflects the world it meant to exclude" (ll.16, 17, 19).

Orr primarily has one subject in both his poetry and his memoir, The Blessing (2001)—tragedy. Orr resourcefully uses his linguistic powers to transform his personal

tragedy into poetry and personal renewal. The confession of the events that altered his life and the volatile emotions that resulted are the basis of much of his work. In writing The Blessing, Orr turns to memoir, he says, to "go beyond making the moment coherent, as I can in a poem, to making the entire life coherent" (qtd. in Barbato, "Gregory Orr: Fields of Redemption," 2002). In the beginning of The Blessing, we are given an image of confession when Orr is reluctantly recounting to the trooper how the accident happened. His words are "written down in an official report." He feels "guilt and shame." The event is now "absolute and ineradicable" (18). According to Lazer, "Orr's memoir provides a narrative, factual basis for the genesis of his poetry; it also clarifies the personal necessity and the profoundly healing and spiritual quality of Orr's poetry" (43).

Orr explains how "violent trauma shreds the web of meaning" and one must find a way to "reconnect [the] self to the world" (134) in trauma's wake. In Poetry as Survival, Orr borrows from Molly Peacock's poem, the "Valley of Monsters," to illustrate the power of confession to bring us to a new place—to one of healing:

> The curious thing about expression
> is that simple telling of something begins the motion
>
> of fulfilling the need to say it. Thus it is healthy
> to speak, even in rhymes, about where we see
>
> we're going, even if we haven't been there to find
> our answers yet. (72-73)

Telling the trooper how the events of his brother's death unfolded began Orr's journey of confession. His personal lyrics and memoir are the heightened expressions that serve to transform his world from one depleted of meaning to one that held it again as a blank page for Orr to transcribe for himself. Orr appears to be acutely aware of the importance of language. Language serves his confessional voice; it is what connects him to the world. Lazer observes that, "Orr's emphasis falls upon the personal lyric's redemptive function—its ability to foster (individualized) understanding and survival (46). He says of his father in The Blessing, "I could feel that he loved the power and beauty of words rhythmically compressed into meaning. He passed that awe on to me and it's sustained me my whole life" (57).

While Orr's personal lyrics hold more imagery, metaphor, and musicality, like his memoir, confession is at the heart. Rosenthal says of the confessional in The New Poets (1976), "The self seeks to discover itself through the energy of its insights into reality and through the sensuous excitement generated in it by its experience of reality" (13). Lazer concurs, "In order to write well, a poet needs to go to that place where energy and intensity concentrate, that place just beyond where chaos and randomness reign" (47). The personal "I," Gregory Orr, talking about his own life with passion and energy, is reaching out to the world, "being reborn as language" (The Blessing 209) and triumphing over chaos. He says, "I wanted to be born again as something deathless and secular" (209). Translating the confessional voice to words on paper, Orr makes art out of meaninglessness and mayhem and in doing so, recreates the self.

In a similar fashion to the Puritans, Orr uses memory and internal dialogue to recreate his image from that of a socially disconnected killer to a boy in the world linked

to others in his search for meaning. The internal dialogue, the unfolding of the self, is inherent in confession. Consider the parallel of the Puritans' construction of self through internal dialogue and Orr's description of constructing a self through language:

> The world that was to lure me and place me under its spell was an inner world, the world inside me. Not the landscape already crisscrossed with roads that are other people's novels or plays, but my own interior landscape. I was enthralled by the possibility of making my own paths out of language, each word put down like a luminous footstep, the sentence itself extending behind me in a white trail and, ahead of me, the dark unknown urging me to explore it. (The Blessing 143)

The path Orr embarked upon is the path of self-discovery as tied to memory. Confession brings us to self-discovery as we prepare our minds with an internal dialogue. Orr's path has him "travers[ing] a series of points [that] mark discontinuities of the self." The "dark unknown" ahead of Orr is that of the reformed self slowly being constructed through his confessional voice—the voice marking his individualism and his own path. Orr says in the sixth section, titled "The Journey" in the poem, "Gathering the Bones Together," "But tonight the bones in my feet / begin to burn. I stand up / and start walking" (ll.57-59, 85).

Orr embraces confessional writing as a service to the self, contrary to the lyric poetry found before the mid-eighteenth century when most lyric poets "express[ed] and dramatiz[ed] the values and attitudes of the ruling elites" (135). Orr pays homage to the Romantics, inspired by Rousseau, who "took lyric back.... Returning it to its ancient and honorable identity as personal lyric, [the Romantics] used it according to its primordial function of ordering individual lives around emotionally charged experiences and

restabilizing the self in a chaotic time" (139). Sabean quotes Alain Corbin referring to Rousseau's search for the "memorative sign" that could make the "'I' feel its own history and disclose itself to itself . . . an 'I' conceived as the contraction of the whole self around one single point" (5). Orr says of the lyric poem, "[I]t constellates around a single center, usually an emotional center: a dominant feeling" ("The Poet's Choice: Lyric or Narrative" 1998). Orr uses the memory of his brother's death as the single point around which he conceives a contraction of the whole self. He uses confession of his brother's death to disclose his history; in doing so, he reproduces the self as a stable individual after instability has threatened to destroy him.

For Orr, the confessional voice is transmitted through a "spectrum of disclosure" (Poetry as Survival 91). In this spectrum, confessionalism is seen as working along a continuum of language. The far left of the spectrum begins with silence—silence that enshrouds shame, fear, and guilt. After silence comes speech, a blurted discourse. From speech we move onto writing. Writing itself moves along the continuum in varying levels of complexity and organization, in craft. Orr moves from a diary or journal where thoughts are written crudely, to a shaped narrative or memoir, to poetry (91).

This "spectrum of disclosure" allows for confessional writing to be present among varying genres. The act of confessing through writing is not limited by genre. While memory is at the heart of the confessional voice, how memory is transcribed is dependent on the genre. Each writer's style of expression places their work within a literary genre, but the confessional voice within their work serves to call out above genre and speak to the reader in universal themes. While we may not enjoy reading personal lyric poetry as opposed to memoir (or other various genres), we are still able to recognize the

confessional voice speaking to us in each. The voice is delivered by way of genre. It isn't so much about how it gets there, but what it says to us once it has arrived.

Chapter Three: The Contract of Confessionalism

> [T]he stagings of personal voice and personal attachment could not be loosely indulged forever nor lightly banished for long, however strong the recoil, and I think we've come to read and write with better balance again.... I believe; I do. (Gregerson, Negative Capability 4)

Linda Gregerson's poetry fights off a neat, precise fit into any one literary category given its unique blend of political, social, historical, and theological elements that can at times inhabit one poem; however, she clearly employs stylistic devices and characteristics of the confessional and post-confessional genres. In using the term post-confessional, I am referring to contemporary poets who arguably follow in the tradition of noted confessional poets Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, John Berryman, and Theodore Roethke. Such poets centered their poems around the self, or as Rosenthal posits, "In a larger, more impersonal context, these poems seemed to me one culmination of the Romantic and modern tendency to place the literal Self more and more at the center of the poem" (27).

As with Gregerson, contemporary poet Frank Bidart writes in a confessional mode as well. While both poets are often the speaking voice in their respective poems, they differ in their intentions for placing themselves there. Gregerson gives us intimate snapshots of her life; she talks of personal relationships that beg examination and understanding. In trying to make sense of her own experiences, Gregerson draws parallels between her life and the noted stories and histories of others around the world, those stories with universal appeal. Bidart's poems are seemingly less about others and center on his own pursuit of meaning and understanding. He is not as interested in the collective

struggle, but in his own grappling with meaning. Where Gregerson reaches out to others, asking questions that we are to ask ourselves, Bidart's poetry is less about connecting with others and more about trying to understand his unique place in life and the thoughts and ideas that make him Frank Bidart, like no other.

I will begin by exploring the work of Linda Gregerson. There is no doubt that there is a speaking voice, the personal "I," which takes us through experiences of her life, shared with her family, or as observed by her from a distance that allows for simultaneous intimacy (in recognizing universalities) and separation (divided by time and space). Within most of her poems, it is Gregerson's ability to infuse large historical, philosophical, and theological questions (sparked and ignited by the Renaissance) with human intimacy, connecting us to the world and making her characteristically unique as a poet. Personal lyric poetry is marked by the pronoun 'I' and the self is at the center of the poem, just as Rosenthal observed of confessional poetry. While the personal lyric is subjective, it is not always about suffering. Confessional poetry is often associated with personal crisis, the speaker exposes the darker thoughts and anxieties that cause torment and one interprets their poetry as a release. Gregerson's poetry is not restricted to pain and suffering, but a great deal of her poems explore its pervasive presence in life, felt by everyone.

In rendering the poem as readily accessible, Gregerson craftily uses personal anecdotes. She says in an essay on Ben Jonson, "It is not pleasant to be chronically reproached" by reading poetry that feels inaccessible ("Ben Jonson and the Loathed Word" 87). Yet in the images woven among the anecdotes we come to see Gregerson's own intellectualism and the effects of her extensive and comprehensive background in

Renaissance history. She becomes a poet we can learn from, not merely one confessing personal experience as a means to cope in the world. She pushes us to ask bigger questions of ourselves as part of humanity; she invites us to ask them with her. She acknowledges that, "the reader is an intimate, one of the partners in utterance" ("Rhetorical Contract in the Lyric Poem" 167). Gregerson argues for a "ceremony of reciprocal declaration":

> Speaking/not speaking the word himself, [the poet] has caused it to be spoken (if only silently) by the other, by the *you*, by the partner in feeling and discourse, by the one whose goodness has prompted the poem in the first place and now, in the act of reading, confirms it. ("Rhetorical Contract in the Lyric Poem" 177)

In a confessional vein, there is the encouragement to "disassociate from some of the values—religious, social, and moral—[we] once relied upon for personal stability" (Harris, "Breaking the Code of Silence," 260) and to instead rely upon a stabilizing relationship forged between writer and reader when the confessional voice is communicated. Gregerson believes:

> [P]oetry, like public speaking, has a suasive agenda: the poem may affect the contours of solitary meditation or unfiltered mimesis, the recklessness of outburst or the abstraction of music, but it always also seeks to convince, or coerce, or seduce a reader; it is never disinterested, never pure; it has designs on the one who listens or reads. ("Rhetorical Contract in the Lyric Poem" 166)

Gregerson uses confessionalism to develop a partnership with her readers. It follows Foucault's "understanding of the importance for the completion of the confession of the relationship between subject and reader, penitent and confessor" (Gill 432).

Joan Aleshire posits in her essay, "Staying News: A Defense of the Lyric," that "all poems with a high emotional content in which the speaker can be identified as the poet are being labeled confessional" (14). This "high emotional content" is found in many of Gregerson's poems, holding up an umbrella of confessionalism for her to be under. In particular, those poems written about her father and their tenuous, if not strained and alienated relationship mark Gregerson as one who has not reconciled familial estrangement. In "For My Father, Who Would Rather Stay at Home" from her book The Woman Who Died In Her Sleep (1996), Gregerson's emotional vulnerability comes through and we do not deny that she is the speaker:

Remember when we planted the Norway

pine? Five hundred seedlings
the first
year and not one of them made

full growth. No light.
Or scant
light, what the grudging oaks

let through. What you love
best
shall be taken away

and taken away in the other
life too,
where you haven't got

a stand of oak at all,
old man,
nor three winters' cordwood,

nor work for the heart,
nor hapless
daughters

to mortgage everything up. (ll.38-57, 5-6)

Gregerson does not assuage her feelings, nor does she hold back. She is asking of her father to look beyond the woods and his natural surroundings so that he may see the relationship with his daughters has been, and is, an almost nonexistent one, unless he takes the time to nurture it, to pay attention. Like the Norway pines that never saw full growth, so too, did the speaker's relationship with her father never have enough "light / Or scant / light, what the grudging oaks / let through" to grow into something mutually affectionate and loving. Gregerson partially regrets this relationship with the father who "would rather stay at home." Mourning a relationship that wasn't, Gregerson's regret marks the presence of a confessional voice.

In sharing personal, autobiographical experiences with her readers, Gregerson has us baited and hooked. She then effortlessly reels us in and we get a glimpse of something we didn't expect to see. Does Gregerson take advantage of the voyeuristic nature of humanity? Is she capitalizing on our voracious hunger for a glimpse of the private and the personal? Perhaps, but she doesn't do so in vain, or for the instant "thrill" we get from watching reality television. Gregerson knows that our individual experiences constitute a collective whole and that the collective human experience can lead to a semblance of truth. Truth is glimpsed at in the search of it; it is not the answer or where one arrives at the end. It is what we know and experience along the way. It is what we can share with others; it receives recognition. Yet how many of us claim to know the truth? While we all may not realize our truths, we all journey through life in its search. Truth is comforting—

even in its harsh, abrasive forms. It is a catalyst for change. "One enters a poem," Gregerson says, "to be changed" (Negative Capability 2).

While there is great concentratation on craft, Gregerson finds room for the self in her work. She does not sacrifice one for the other, nor should she have to. There remains a sense of loyalty to her audience when she says, "The gestures of autobiography are part of the poet's contract with her reader and with form" (Negative Capability 2-3). Note: the contract does not take place merely between the poet and the self; there is room for more than one, more than the "I."

Aleshire says, "the poem of personal experience—the true lyric poem—can, through vision, craft, and objectivity toward the material, give a sense of commonality with unparalleled intimacy" (14). In Gregerson's poem, "Bunting," (The Woman Who Died in Her Sleep), Gregerson uses two very different intimate experiences to address the universal theme of unconditional love. In section 2 of the poem she speaks about her own daughter:

> Megan woke up at three last night,
> cold
> and wet and frightened till we made
>
> her warm. We had clean nightclothes.
> We had
> clean sheets. Plentiful water runs
>
> from the taps. Megan believes that someone's
> in charge
> here: Megan thinks love
>
> can make you safe. (ll.1-10; 28-9)

Gregerson uses this idea of thinking that "love can make you safe" and weaves it into another section of her poem, crafting the poem to lend it "commonality" while

maintaining "intimacy." In section 3, Gregerson takes this idea and questions: 1) can love make you safe? and 2) what does safe mean for the individual? Clearly, "safe" can take on new meaning in each individual circumstance. What may be safe for Gregerson's daughter Megan, living in care of two loving parents and a privileged section of the universe is not safe for the child living in war-torn "Vukovar…in nineteen ninety-one" (29). Gregerson says in section 3:

> Here is the infant
>   who smothered.
>   It seems that the valves on the breathing device
>
> can be turned the wrong way. Here
>   is the mother
>   who turned them. (ll.19-24, 31)

The mother in section 3, a mother like Gregerson but hostage to an oppressive, vile other place, has killed her own infant in an attempt to keep the child "safe." Safe from the missiles seeking destruction, safe from the monstrosities of war, safe from a nightmarish life of misery in a beleaguered country. By way of unconditional love for her baby, she does the unthinkable to keep it safe. "Safe" for this mother is death to one life, for the peace and comfort in a believed-in other, the life beyond. Gregerson's achieved intimacy gives us insight into two alarmingly polarized worlds, yet we find the "commonality" in a mother's unconditional love for her child and the sacrifices made by each individual. By crafting the poem into sections, Gregerson is able to weave a common thread through the poem, continuing a thought, although she takes it to an altogether different place while allowing the universality to surface. Gregerson sees this as a need for the poem to "stop where it's going and go elsewhere…it needs to be found by that elsewhere" (lecture).

Throughout her poetry, Gregerson has not been afraid of asking intimidating questions. She has shed great light on her personal experiences, leading to the questions, so that in turn the questions may shed light on our own experiences. The experience (the triggering subject) fires a question; the question extends to a new and unexpected path (the generated subject); the unexpected path leads to a further examination of the question and it is then that we (aha!) begin to ask our own questions. Gregerson says, "The self invented to speak the poem, invented *by* the poem it speaks, may lend proportion and differential weight and an organizing center to vistas that would otherwise be too raucous or too flat" (Negative Capability 4). The poet, or the poem, dares us to dig deeper. The personal lyric poem reshapes these "vistas" so that we may explore and internalize them; in organizing a center, we can access that center.

In their compilation of essays on poetry as autobiography, Sontag and Graham have exposed a concurring belief that "first-person lyrics can embrace a larger social vision, achieving revelation over narcissism, universal resonance over self-referential anecdote" (6). In Gregerson's poem "Grammatical Mood," from her book, Waterborne (2002), she is able to do just that:

For want of an ion the synapse was lost.

For want of a synapse the circuit was lost.
For want
of a circuit, the kingdom, the child, the social

smile. And this is just one of the infinite means by which
the world
may turn aside. When my young daughter, whose

right hand and foot do not obey her, made us take
off
the training wheels, and rode and fell and pedaled

and fell through a week and a half of summer twilights
and finally
on her own traversed the block of breathing maples

and the shadowed street, I knew
what it was like
to fly. (2.ll.1-16, 61)

Gregerson uses a very intimate family experience (watching her daughter's physical limitations exact patience and fortitude), filled with pain, anguish, and then finally, joy, to communicate a larger idea about the world. Gregerson is commenting on the indifference of causal relationships as relating to human beings. We live in a world where "God's own / strict grammar (imperative mood)" (4.ll.7-8, 63) does not bend or soften to our wants and needs. Gregerson has allowed us into a part of her life, her daughter's physical misfortune, as a means to frame a larger question about times in our own lives when we can't bear the indifference of the world for our suffering. We begin to question our roles as human beings in the universe. Is God holding the strings, maneuvering them according to his mood? Are we simply at the mercy of science—cause and effect? Do we hold any power to alter our fate? Heady, murky questions, raised by revelation of Gregerson's personal experiences. In Gregerson's own essay on poet Tess Gallagher, Gregerson attributes to Gallagher's poems what can be said of her own: "[S]he can play with the oracular and the histrionic while seeming to temper them with irony and afterthought" (Negative Capability 123).

"There are reasons, often abstract or chiefly musical reasons," Gregerson says, "to plot a poem around the ostensible transparencies of personal history" (Negative Capability 4). Gregerson defends the idea of "poetry as autobiography" as editors Sontag and Graham suggest in their title (After Confession: Poetry as Autobiography).

Autobiographical poetry is not always self-indulgent; it can carry us beyond the speaker, the poet. What the poet does is demonstrate an ability through form and craft to move the poem beyond any surface it may initially suggest. Sontag argues for the belief that the poem, once written, becomes independent of the poet and thus poetic, not merely autobiographical:

> Love of the poetic idea, the image, the line, the surprise and permutations of individual words, music and lyrical structure—all of these figure into a poem taking on a life of its own, beyond the people who inhabit it or who provide the narrative impetus. (154)

For Gregerson, personal history is the vehicle, which moves its passengers through the poem. The poem itself is mapped out by image, line, structure—craft. The poem can exist without the passengers, but when traveled, we learn where the poem can lead. For in all its intimacies (the personal, the anecdotal) and abstractions (the ideas), the poem ultimately leads to ourselves. A rhetorical contract between the reader and writer holds the reader as equally responsible in the confessionalism found among the written material. Confessional writing needs confirmation.

Frank Bidart, like Gregerson a labeled postconfessional poet, enters into a contract with his readers as well. In his essay, "'Necessary Thought:' Frank Bidart and the Postconfessional" (1993), Jeffrey Gray acknowledges two poles of poetry. He says, "At one pole is language poetry, which, ... attempts to purge poetry of origin, narrative voice, and affect. At the other pole is ... a form of persistent confessionalism which regards the poem as a verbal device meant to reproduce the poet's emotion in the reader"

(714). The poem as a verbal device used by confessional poets allows for the contract between reader and writer to be made. Not only is a contract made in a confessional poem, but also we see the word "reproduce" again. The narrative voice, most often the author, in entering a contract with his or her reader, is reproduced by way of confessionalism. As the writer gives of him or herself, exposing inner dialogue and personal thoughts and ideas, he or she can take comfort in knowing that revealing intimate secrets will lead to a reproduction, a renewal of self in the reader. Confessionalism is not destructive, but life-sustaining.

For Bidart, his poetry seems to give him a life-purpose. As a poet, like Keats, who anxiously recognized that the great works have been written and that "nothing is *left* to be done," Bidart then reflects upon his own life and realizes that "NOTHING is figured out; NOTHING is understood....EVERYTHING remains to be figured out, ordered" (qtd. in Gray 717). While Bidart does not confess to experiencing significant personal trauma as Orr does, or using personal experience as a backdrop for asking humanity's seemingly impenetrable universal questions as Gregerson does, Bidart uses his poetry to trace his own inner thoughts. He is interested in poetry that reveals his own "*necessary* thought...[which] expresses or acknowledges what has resisted thought, what has forced or irritated it into being" (qtd. in Gray 717).

In Bidart's poem, "Confessional" (The Sacrifice), characteristically troubling thoughts drive the poem as Bidart laments his mother's death, his inability to participate in forgiveness, and the impact his relationship with her had on the production of self. Here is an excerpt from "Confessional":

I *did* "will" to forgive her, but

FORGIVENESS lay beyond the will,---

...and I *willed NOT to forgive her*,
for "forgiveness" seems to say:---

Everything is forgotten, obliterated,---
the past

is as nothing, erased ...

Her plea, her need for forgiveness
seemed the attempt to obliterate

the ACTIONS, ANGERS, DECISIONS

that *made me* what I am ...

To obliterate the CRISES, FURIES, REFUSALS
that are how I
came to *UNDERSTAND* her---; me---;

my life ....(46)

Bidart's refusal to forgive his mother for the transgressions he endured by her is also Bidart's refusal to discredit the past and the past's influence on the present and future Frank Bidart the person, the person who writes poetry as a way to cope with passionate emotions and to understand the self. Bidart's forgiveness would interrupt and quiet the "necessary thought" that fuels his poetry. His forgiveness would threaten his livelihood—his poetic ability. Forgiveness is too high a price to pay; Bidart cannot sacrifice his own understanding of self to ease his dying mother's anxiety. While the death of one is enough to bear, the death of two is not permissible.

The abstraction of the lines opening Bidart's poem "For the Twentieth Century," reflect the abstraction of his thoughts in this less somber poem. Here we see a grateful Bidart in contrast to the tormented one in "Confessional." He writes:

Bound, hungry to pluck again from the thousand

technologies of ecstasy

boundlessness, the world that at a drop of water

rises without boundaries, [...] (ll.1-4, 23)

In these lines that require repeated readings to grasp what Bidart is *thinking*, one may construct a parallel to Bidart's idea that "EVERYTHING remains to be figured out." At first the poet feels bound, creatively restrained by the literary achievements that have already been done. Yet, his hunger to create, to understand and figure out his life and the world he inhabits does not bind him for long as he realizes the availability of prolific subjects that inspire ideas and require thought. Once realized, he acknowledges and appreciates the boundless world of ideas that can come from the smallest of activity—a universe of thought encouraged by otherwise insignificant experiences.

Lines later in the poem, Bidart honors his appreciation for the currency of his poetic material. He says:

Therefore you and I and Mozart

must thank the Twentieth Century, for

it made you pattern, form

whose infinite

repeatability within matter

defies matter—.... (ll.13-18, 23)

It is from the "infinite / repeatability within matter" of Bidart's lifetime that he draws his inspiration. In the twentieth century, pattern can be traced and found; the infinite repeatability discovered in a pattern provokes new thought, allowing Bidart to interpret the world and attempt to find meaning. Resistance to pattern is the basis of Bidart's work. However, pattern is necessary for Bidart to first recognize it, and then break free from it. In Gray's article, he makes the distinction between confessional and autobiographical in relation to Bidart's poetry. Bidart does not "portray" his life autobiographically but "[r]ather, he wants to 'figure out *why* the past was as it was, what patterns and powers kept me at its mercy (so I could change, and escape)'" (718). This statement illuminates Bidart's reference to "pattern" in the section above. Bidart chooses to break the mold and try to forge his own way. And to forge one's own way requires a confessional mode of writing to separate the self out from an inexplicable past. What is stated in parentheses carries significant weight. Bidart is quietly confessing to his need to write poetry that resists pattern and reproduces the self.

For Bidart, "Only if it resists is it real" (Gray 734). In his poem, "Legacy," there is both a resistance to pattern (generational) and an investigation into the past. Recalling his grandparents' move to America from Spain "to escape / poverty" (ll.10-11, 24) and make a viable living off of the land, Bidart resists the "legacy" left behind for him and his family. He recounts:

After Spain became

Franco's, at last

rich enough

to return you

refused to return

The West you made

was never unstoried, never

artless.

Excrement of the sky our rage inherits

there was no gift

outright we were never the land's[.] (ll.13-23, 24-25)

In choosing the word "rage," the resistance communicated in this poem is strongly felt. Bidart retells his grandparents' evolution from poverty to wealth in America, but he is not inspired by it. It is *their* history, *their* past, *their* land, not his. This is a sound example of Bidart's attempt to determine what patterns and powers "kept [him] at its mercy" as stated earlier. The legacy of the land is something Bidart is trying to escape. He did not ask for it, as a gift or otherwise. To him it is "excrement of the sky," void of life-sustaining meaning. What was necessary to his grandparents' survival is not necessary to his. What *is* necessary to Bidart, however, is the thought behind this poem: the thought that evolves and solidifies into words on paper so that Bidart can work out his past and renew the self. In "Legacy," Bidart makes known his inability to suffer a life laid out for

him without asking questions, without thinking about why he is where he is in this world today. According to Gray, "Bidart's characters insist on finding meaning, and they fail, thus allowing *us* to find meaning in their intensity and their failure. If they succeeded, we would not believe them; because they fail, we can believe" (737). Gray is recognizing a contract between the reader and confessional poet as well. The success of each is contingent upon the other. The reader finds success through identification, while the poet finds success in making the reader identify through confessional narration.

Perhaps for Bidart, failure precludes escape, escape being his aim; thus, Bidart is successful in escaping by way of failure. In his failure to accept his grandparents' legacy, his failure to find relevant meaning in the land they left behind, "never unstoried, never / artless," he succeeds in expressing "necessary thought": "what has resisted thought, what has forced or irritated it into being" (qtd. in Gray 717). If Bidart were to succeed at finding meaning, there would be no need for "necessary thought." Because he fails, not only do Bidart's readers identify with his poetry, but Bidart is able to go on putting his "necessary thought" to good use: the confessional poem and the confessional narrator searching for meaning when it is perpetually evasive. Thought, however, is available at any given moment, ready and willing to be wrested out.

Chapter Four: Storytelling and Narration in Sontag's Work

When one thinks of the late Susan Sontag, one thinks of her brilliancy and intellectual panache for writing provocative essays. Rarely does one think of her fiction. However, Sontag's fiction won her critical acclaim and recognition. Her 2000 novel, In America, won the National Book Award. Sontag's use of confessionlism in this novel is not outright. It's barely there, but it can be traced. Written about a Polish family that immigrates to America in search of prosperity, the beginning of the novel introduces a character whom I believe to be Sontag herself. She expresses her overwhelming desire to tell this family's compelling story. It is the only time in the novel that first-person narration is used. On page 14, the storyteller says:

> I thought I had time, for their feelings, their story; and my own. They seemed—and I pledged myself to be like them, on their behalf—indefatigable. Yet this didn't strip me of my impatience. I was waiting for quick relief: to hear something, a sentence, that would bring me the nub and drift of their concern.

In this passage, Sontag is channeling her characters through her self. In the first sentence of the passage, Sontag draws a parallel between the feelings of her characters and her own, requiring time to consider and express them. In telling their story, she is telling her own. Not literally, not autobiographically, but the feelings her characters experience as a result of their situations reflect similar feelings Sontag has experienced as well. Writing needs a catalyst.

Or as Sontag says, "Both in fiction and in autobiography, first-person narrating generally needs a pretext—also known as a justification—to begin" ("Where the Stress

Falls" 15). We are provoked to write as a response to our own interior feelings, thoughts, and beliefs. Sontag requires time to develop her thoughts and feelings so that she may craft them into a story about a Polish family coming to America. In her introduction, Sontag, who I have concluded is the storyteller, rationalizes writing their story, or anyone else's for that matter—but it is ultimately her own. She explains that, "Each of us carries a room within ourselves, waiting to be furnished and peopled, and if you listen closely, you may need to silence everything in your room, you can hear the sounds of that other room in your own head" (27).

For Sontag, there is tension between reflective narration and storytelling as evidenced in her fiction and essays. In a confessional sense, personal reflection can be evinced through first-person narration. Sontag feels that first-person narration can also tell someone else's story. While yes, it can, it also requires a piece of ourselves to be born as something else. Sontag says in her essay, "[F]iction of all kinds has always fed on writers' lives. Every detail in a work of fiction was once an observation or a memory or a wish, or is a sincere homage to a reality independent of the self" ("Where the Stress Falls" 25). Sontag embodies this statement in the introduction to <u>In America</u> as she calls upon the "other room within ourselves" to conjure up the memories, observations, and realities that provide her the ability to tell a story. She tempers the confessional voice of the storyteller with the sentiment, "I'm not really talking about myself but about them" ("Where the Stress Falls" 15). Yet in calling on the other within ourselves to write about others external to ourselves, the confessional voice is buried beneath fictional characters. In talking about them, the author is inadvertently talking about herself.

Sontag will not readily admit that she writes about herself. As I stated earlier, there is a tension that lies between Sontag as writer and Sontag as storyteller. She says in her essay titled, "Writing as Reading," "Why wouldn't you write to escape yourself as much as you might write to express yourself? It's far more interesting to write about others" (266). However, isn't writing to escape a form of expression? The difference is between direct and indirect expression. Direct expression is the confessionalism found in Orr, Gregerson, and Bidart, the expression of personal lyric poetry or memoir. Indirect expression in the form of fiction, as in Sontag's case, nevertheless holds confessional bits and pieces. Shortly after arguing for writing as escape, Sontag says:

> Needless to say, I lend bits of myself to all my characters. When, in In America, my immigrants from Poland reach southern California—they're just outside the village of Anaheim—in 1876, stroll out into the desert, and succumb to a terrifying, transforming vision of emptiness, I was drawing on my own memory of childhood walks into the desert of southern Arizona.... (266)

Sontag's self-expression is felt in the feeling and emotion of her fictional characters. Emotive words such as "terrifying" and "transforming vision of emptiness" trace us back to the author, not so much to the characters or the fictional story. We know the characters are fictional, but the author writing their story is not. And in this sense, each time the author describes something, feels something, thinks something, for a character, the author gives away a part of the self, confesses to something interior, and brings us closer to knowing him or her as a person, not just as an author who writes stories. On page 49 of Sontag's novel In America, her character Miranda says:

> It's good to be happy, but it's vulgar to *want* to be happy. And if you *are* happy, it's vulgar to know it. It makes you complacent. What's important is self-respect, which will be yours only as long as you stay true to your ideals. It's so easy to compromise, once you've enjoyed a modicum of success.

This moral advisement and wisdom comes from Sontag through her character. As the reader, we feel that Sontag is speaking directly to us. I, for one, do not visualize Miranda speaking to another character or herself, but visualize Sontag expressing sentiments that apply to her own life; experiences with happiness and success and a warning to others of happiness' beguiling effects. Wisdom can be communicated through fictional characters as a result of an author's personal experience with it.

G.M. Tamas says in his essay written about Sontag after her death:

> The sole true heroism for Sontag—or to use a quieter expression, the only highorder form of living—was art, the experiencing of (not the "giving form to") our unconscious urges, our sensual-emotional poverty, our social oppression and muddled irrationality as suprapersonal form. That is why she liked diaries.... By definition, confession is not aristocratic, but, rather, a state of undress, an asceticism, since it is neither elegant nor even natural. An artist has to acquire power over his public, "his milieu;" an aristocrat has power already. (365)

Sontag understood the power behind confession. Confessional writing allows the author to strip the self of its masked appearances, humble the self to its reading public, and redefine the self as "someone like me." Tamas argues that confession is "neither elegant

nor even natural." While I will agree that it is far from elegant, I feel that it is natural. As human beings, it is natural for us to want to share our experiences and find recognition in others to justify our own feelings. However, wanting to share and being able to share are at odds against one another; this difference marks "true heroism" for Sontag. Philosopher Michele Foucalt suggests "confession is a ritual in which the truth [or the subject's bravery] is corroborated by the obstacles and resistances it has had to surmount in order to be formulated" (qtd. in Gill 435). Those writers who carry an ability to express "unconscious urges" in the form of confession are heroic, brave in their vulnerability; they risk compromising the sanctity of the private self in order to be better understood, in order for the world to be better understood. And they risk being misunderstood, which is more worrisome than being not understood at all. In Sontag's essay "Against Interpretation," she states, "The fact is, all Western consciousness of and reflection upon art have remained within the confines staked out by the Greek theory of art as mimesis or representation" (Against Interpretation 4). When art is *not* a representation, how does one understand it? *Can* one understand it?

Sontag struggles in her own writing to let go and place herself in a vulnerable spot. She asks, "How much fact from the author's life can be sponged up without our becoming reluctant to call the book a novel?" ("Where the Stress Falls" 26). Sontag is aware of one of the fundamental problems in categorizing literature today. Every author of fiction seems to feel guilty about borrowing bits of his or her own life, confessing to his or her own experiences, exposing his or her own memories and calling it a work of fiction. Writing in the first person, stating that the story is about the author's life, and attesting to the events that occur is hardly fiction. This is autobiography. However,

drawing from personal experience, arguing moral sentiments, and writing from the truth of one's perspective is permissible. While permissible, it invites interpretation that is not always welcome. Sontag says, "For decades now, literary critics have understood it to be their task to translate the elements of the poem or play or novel or story into something else" in an attempt to understand ("Against Interpretation" 8). It is the job of the critic to determine what the elements in a work of literature represent so the reader can better understand and enjoy the work.

Every author is limited by what he or she knows. We cannot come to expect fiction to be entirely absent of the author's personal life. Sontag admits, "You can use your life, but only a little, and at an oblique angle" ("Where the Stress Falls" 26). This is the conscious allowance of the writer. Yet, the "unconscious urges" come through unknowingly and the reader sees confession where the writer may be unaware of its presence. Or perhaps the writer is fully aware. Sontag says, "Sometimes a writer will be so uneasy before the naked power of his art that he will instill within the work itself—albeit with a little shyness, a touch of the good taste of irony—the clear and explicit interpretation of it" ("Against Interpretation" 8). Consider Sontag's Miranda in In America when she says, "[The] illusion of an actor ... of one used to changing characters, putting on the garments of another ... can be done *without* being on a stage!" (123). Indeed, it can be done; Sontag does it well. Any successful fiction writer does. The mask of the character only conceals so much before the reality of the author behind the mask is exposed. It is the expert negotiation between reality and expression.

In Sontag's short story, "Doctor Jekyll," from her collection of short stories titled, I, Etcetera (1978), I believe that Sontag explores the nuanced differences between the

author's reality and his or her expression. In a sarcastic exchange between Sontag's characters Utterson and Jekyll, Utterson tells Jekyll he didn't say anything funny. Jekyll insists, saying, "I did [say something funny]." Utterson then "roars," "I, I, I" ... "Do you hear yourself?" ... "Who has the right to say 'I'?" ... "Not you! Do you hear? That's a right that has to be earned!" (200).

This passage provoked much analyzing on my part. Self-expression, according to Utterson, has to be earned. We all say "I" when referring to the self, but I believe what Sontag wants us to consider, and what she struggles with, is the "I" we are evoking. Is it the "I" of reality or the "I" of expression? The "I" of expression can be masked, dramatized, and concealed. Jo Gill says in her essay "Anne Sexton and Confessional Poetics," "The use of the persona 'I' is crucial to the imaginative process, offering a screen behind which to hide, and a blank canvas on which to project new identities" (443). Yet the "I" of reality is difficult to express; it requires courage. Consider the chosen title of her short story collection: I, Etcetera. There is a plurality of self that is not always easily reconciled; it is difficult to project one self when faced with another. There is more than one "self" inherent in every human being. The story of "Jekyll and Hyde," the assumed backdrop of Sontag's story, "Doctor Jekyll," illustrates the two identities trapped inside one being. While the two identities of Jekyll in Sontag's story are not as extreme as in "Jekyll and Hyde," she still uses the character of Jekyll to illustrate a less violent struggle with two selves.

In her story, "Utterson once said, 'I am a human being without quotation marks.'" (201). Utterson recognizes the problem of speaking one's truth as a human being with the complexities of self-expression. Quotation marks around the self ("I") reduce the self to

mere expression of the self. Utterson's character personifies the struggle between expression and reality. To "utter" is to verbally express something, yet Utterson resists mere expression and calls for a realization of truth in the human form with all of its polarities, not by what the human says or thinks or feels as expressed through verbal utterances.

As human beings we strive to express ourselves as virtuous and morally superior individuals, but it is nearly impossible to be human and not fall victim to the vices of human nature as well. Jekyll "is not sure he wants the responsibility of having all that wisdom in his keeping" (200-01). In wisdom, Jekyll is referring to "the secrets of the harmonious development of humankind" (200). Jekyll feels that this knowledge has made Utterson a "repulsive, heathen and contradictory creature:"

> [S]omeone both taciturn and voluble, mercenary and ascetic, glib and wise, plebeian and princely, obscene and pure, indolent and energetic, cunning and naïve, snobbish and democratic, unfeeling and compassionate, impractical and shrewd, irritable and patient, capricious and reliable, sickly and sturdy, young and old, empty and full, heavy as cement and light as helium. (201)

Yet in these seemingly endless contradictions lies the true self—as Utterson says, "a human being without quotation marks." The expression of self, according to Utterson, can only be earned once this "secret of harmonious development" is realized. Utterson has earned this right, hence, his name. He has the right to utter, "I."

In Sontag's essay, "Singleness," she speaks about a dual self. She says:

> In fact, I never called what I did "my" work but "the" work. By extension, there was that one, the one who had dared to become a writer. And I, the one with the standards, who happily made sacrifices to keep her going, though I didn't think all that much of what she wrote. (260)

In maintaining a duality of self, the writer self and the self that permits writing, Sontag is able to conceal herself behind the writer. Thus, when she says, "[M]y books are not a means of discovering or expressing who I am…" ("Singleness" 260), it is because she has established two selves. There is the expression of one (Susan Sontag the writer) and the repression of the other (Susan Sontag the person). In "Doctor Jekyll," Sontag writes, "Once in a while, one got to see the 'real' Mr. Utterson, with whom one wished to stay forever. This was not the 'everyday' Mr. Utterson, who sometimes was gentle and sometimes very disagreeable, and whom you often wished to run away from" (203).

In Sontag's short story, "The Dummy" (I, Etcetera), again she presents the idea of duality; this time, however, it is with duplication. In her story, the narrator creates a duplicate, a dummy, to take over his life and fulfill his husbandly and fatherly duties. He says, "The problems of this world are only truly solved in two ways: by extinction or by duplication…. I have a choice. And, not being the suicidal type, I have decided to duplicate myself" (88). In duplicating himself, the character controls his life *through* another. Essentially, he is hiding from his problems, he refuses to face them, and he creates another to do it for him. While the undesirable details of his life do not go away with the creation of the dummy, he is removed from his position of responsibility in handling them.

Sontag's idea of duality is a theme that runs throughout her short story collection, propelled by the collection's title—I, Etcétera—signifying more than one. (It is "I" and the other selves that accompany me.) Like her character in "The Dummy," Sontag confesses in her essay, "Singleness," to having an "other" to accomplish her writing. She says in the essay written nearly twenty years after the story's publication, "I've got this onerous charge, this work-obsessed, ambitious writer who bears the same name as I do. I'm just me, accompanying, administering, tending to *that* one, so she can get some work done" (261). As a young writer, Sontag was uncomfortable with the idea of surrendering herself to the criticisms of her writing. By creating an "other," the critiques and faults of her writing would be hurled at the writer self, not the Sontag self.

With experience, acclaim, and a grounded sense of self, Sontag finally comes to terms with herself as the writer, saying, "I've slowly evolved in the opposite direction and at last come to feel that the writer is me: not my double, or familiar, or shadow playmate, or creation" ("Singleness" 261). However, despite this admission, Sontag will not allow herself to fully embrace confessionalism in her own writing. She is cautious. In "The Dummy," her character wonders with anticipation:

> But then you never know what goes on behind that imperturbable dummy's face of his. I'm afraid to ask him. Is it because I don't want to know the worst? Or because I'm afraid he'll be angry at my violation of his privacy? In any case, I have decided to wait until he tells me. (91)

This passage is illustrative of Sontag as protective of her own exposure. Yet she was an admirer of, and held a strong fascination for, others' ability to courageously expose

themselves in their writing. But in exploring Sontag's fiction we are able to puzzle together pieces of Sontag that inevitably find a way into her work:

> You try to protect yourself.... Cauterizing the torment of personal relations with hot lexical choices, jumpy punctuation, mercurial sentence rhythms. Devising more subtle, more engorged ways of knowing, of sympathizing, of keeping at bay. It's a matter of adjectives. It's where the stress falls. ("Where the Stress Falls" 28, 29)

Sontag's crafted storytelling may keep the reader at bay for only so long before a closer, more personal look is desired. And once we peer closer at the text of Sontag's writing, we find Sontag the writer and Sontag the self, crouching beneath the décor of language, at once exposed. The two are one, unable to escape the other. In the end, the confessional voice may be all there is.

Chapter Five: Flannery O'Connor's Resistance to Confessionalism

In exploring authors whose confessionalism in their work is apparent and admitted to, or where it is used sparingly or cautiously, one must also consider authors who are uncomfortable with the idea of confessionalism's presence in their work altogether. While confessional writing seems to be present in the text, why do some authors refute the idea when presented with the belief that their writing exposes a part of themselves? What makes confessionalism welcome and liberating for some writers and haunting and infuriating for others?

Flannery O'Connor is one such author who defied critics who tried to find confessional nuances in her work—traces of personal experience that give the reader a reason to identify with the author. In contrast to the authors explored in previous chapters, O'Connor achieves a sense of intimacy with her readers without being overtly autobiographical. It is her personal vision, not her personal experiences that create a partnership between writer and reader. For O'Connor, the human experience is best illustrated through her everyday, mortal, yet eccentric, characters that awaken us to possibilities. O'Connor wants us to recognize ourselves by way of the characters, as she does the same. Perhaps her resistance to confessionalism comes from a unique experience of writing in which the self is recognized and understood during the process of developing characters that share an earthly experience when encountering the divine. Character development and realization precedes an expression of self, or may *be* an expression of self.

In her essay, "Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction" (O'Connor: Collected Works), O'Connor exhibits discomfort in being "labeled" as an author, or

writing within a genre. For her, this genre is southern fiction. She says, "[E]ven if there are no genuine schools in American letters today, there is always some critic who has just invented one and who is ready to put you into it" (813). O'Connor would like the freedom to decide for herself what kind of writer she is. She also struggles with her critics' perception of literary realism and argues against those who do not see any notion of realism within the grotesque. For O'Connor, this narrowed view is limiting and obstructive to one's understanding of humanity. She says:

> Too many readers and critics ... demand a realism of fact which may, in the end, limit rather than broaden the novel's scope.... We have become so flooded with sorry fiction based on unearned liberties, or on the notion that fiction must represent the typical, that in the public mind the deeper kinds of realism are less and less understandable. (814)

O'Connor looks outside of fact and argues against its realistic quality in fiction. Fact and fiction are at odds with one another. O'Connor ultimately wishes to impress theological and mystical ideas upon her readers—these ideas are not based in fact, but in faith. While O'Connor disapproves of the confessional mode of relating personal experience, she does not necessarily avoid confessionalism by way of her obsession with the divine experience. It is not the kind of confessionalism we have been discussing up to this point. In rendering unusual characters that struggle to be saved by moments of grace, O'Connor confesses to her own personal preoccupation with being saved and in communion with the Holy. O'Connor goes on to say; "All novelists are fundamentally seekers and describers of the real. But the realism of each novelist will depend on his view of the ultimate reaches of reality" (815). Through seeking and describing the real under the

unique interpretive lens of the novelist, a novel, though fiction, sheds light on the author's beliefs and interpretations, thus a thread of confessionalism is woven among the novel's pages.

In a letter to John Selby, dated 18 February 1949, O'Connor speaks on writing from experience. She says to him, "I am not writing a conventional novel, and I think that the quality of the novel I write will derive precisely from the peculiarity or aloneness, if you will, of the experience I write from" (Habit of Being 10). Do the novel's confessional characteristics make it unconventional? And, in what sense does O'Connor mean "not writing a conventional novel?" Does she recognize the problem of categorizing literature when genre demands certain parameters? It seems that she does, and in doing so, O'Connor prefers rather to emphasize the personal elements of the story rather than the conventional ones.

The peculiarity and the aloneness in her stories that O'Connor admits to are very present, and jarring: elements of the "grotesque" are born from them. Consider Joy Hopewell in "Good Country People" (A Good Man is Hard to Find), who changes her name to Hulga to better suit her disposition and physical appearance. Joy's mother, Mrs. Hopewell, "thought of her still as a child because it tore her heart to think instead of the poor stout girl in her thirties who had never danced a step or had any *normal* good times" (266). Several critics have cast Hulga as a thinly veiled O'Connor with her own personal illness (O'Connor suffered from lupus), social quirks, and idiosyncrasies. Hulga expresses an aloneness and peculiarity similar to O'Connor's confession to John Selby. The sentiments are the same, while the medium and the point-of-view are altered to establish fiction. There is a distortion. Likewise, when the fraudulent, "Christian" Bible-

selling, Manley Pointer steals Hulga's artificial leg, O'Connor confronts the reader with another distortion. Pointer is not what he appears to be and Hulga has been manipulated after being vulnerable to Pointer's affections. After all, we learn in "Good Country People" that people are not always as they appear to be, a reality achieved through distortion.

When O'Connor's stories turn on us, when we are awakened to the "grotesque" elements of the plot, we are left probing O'Connor's characters for the messages and meanings of life they try to reveal. In "A Good Man is Hard to Find," of the same titled collection of shorts, O'Connor's "Misfit" presents us with his challenging dilemma and declares that, "Jesus thown everything off balance." Jesus suffered the ultimate punishment in crucifixion for a life lived without sin, thus creating instability and disorder for "The Misfit" and all men and women who came thereafter. He says of his name, "I call myself 'The Misfit' … because I can't make what all I done wrong fit what all I gone through in punishment" (151). "The Misfit" is trying to restore order, achieve a balance, so that he may make meaning out of his life. Killing and stealing are his answer to internal chaos—a distorted view of achieving personal meaning that is grotesque. While The Misfit's distorted view of life cannot be claimed as O'Connor's personal view, it does illustrate for us how distortion of any kind is useful in awakening one to deeper meaning.

While O'Connor was amused by critics' eagerness to place her writing within a specific genre, she nevertheless acknowledged key characteristics that prompted such critics to categorize her stories. In addressing the grotesque in her fiction, O'Connor says in a letter to Ben Griffith, dated 4 May 1955, "I am interested in making up a good case

of distortion, as I am coming to believe it is the only way to make people see" (O'Connor: Collected Works 931). O'Connor may be considered among the people she is referring to. O'Connor is in the act of *distorting* reality in order to *realize* reality. Is this written practice a kind of "anti-confessionalism?" Perhaps there is a distortion of the self through her characters, which enables O'Connor the ability to achieve self-realization; the self is realized through a grotesque distortion. Consider O'Connor's comments in her essay, "The Grotesque in Southern Fiction":

> The direction of many [novelists] will be toward concentration and the distortion that is necessary to get our vision across; it will be more toward poetry than toward the traditional novel. The problem for such a novelist will be to know how far he can distort without destroying, and in order not to destroy, he will have to descend far enough into himself to reach those underground springs that give life to his work. (821)

O'Connor avoids confessional self-indulgence, but leaves room for introspective and reflective writing. She recognizes the blurring of genres as she argues for a distorted vision to come through in her writing. The distortion must be tempered; this temperament comes from the interior self where there is a limit to the distorted reality. The case for distortion in O'Connor's writing inevitably circles back to her singular vision—a vision of her self as a self placed within humanity.

O'Connor places literary merit on an author's vision. She staunchly argues that:

> The novelist must be characterized not by his function but by his vision and we must remember that his vision has to be transmitted and that the limitations and blind spots of his audience will very definitely affect the

> way he is able to show what he sees. ("The Grotesque in Southern Fiction" 819)

O'Connor is correct in pointing out the problem of perspective when making the reader see what the author sees; she is aware that criticism and reader interpretations have much to do with "limitations and blind spots." O'Connor must account for a lacking in deep spirituality or investment in the importance of faith and religiosity on behalf of her audience. This is taken into great consideration when she records her vision into fiction.

To have a vision and to then record it and "transmit" it, in my belief, is to establish a very intimate and personal relationship with the audience, much like a confessional author does. Yet in an anti-confessional way, O'Connor "increas[es] the tendency toward the grotesque in [her] fiction" to transmit her vision through distortion ("The Grotesque in Southern Fiction" 819). As an author O'Connor does not want her audience to be piecing together autobiographical bits of her life to construct an understanding of Flannery O'Connor, the person; thus, she does not allow or support any such interpretation. The audience is not a very reliable source in discriminating biographical fact from fiction, and for O'Connor this is grossly beside the point when her stories have been read and well-digested. O'Connor writes to irritate any superficial understanding between good and evil, the human and divine so that she may share her vision with the world at large. She uniquely illustrates the divine experiences as lived through the human world, a world of sin and evil: experiences that are not easily communicable or apparent. Her work is to be appreciated and enlightening, but it is not to be an inside look into the life of Flannery O'Connor.

However, while O'Connor resists biographical interpretations, we learn a lot about her through her fictional themes, motifs, and resolutions. In a letter to John Hawkes, dated 13 September 1959, she writes:

> I don't think you should write something as long as a novel around anything that is not of the gravest concern to you and everybody else and for me this is always the conflict between an attraction for the Holy and the disbelief in it that we breathe in with the air of the times. (The Habit of Being 349)

Thus, O'Connor does her best to resolve this conflict and recreate it on paper with the hopes of resolution. She creates characters whose disbelief is profound (Hulga is an atheist) or eagerly ready to be abandoned (Bevel, the little boy in "The River," who wants to believe). In O'Connor's stories, disbelief is usually slapped in the face by a moment of grace, the Holy and its presence in the everyday or the unimaginable. This conflict drives O'Connor's stories. As we "breathe in" disbelief in the Holy, O'Connor uses this life-denial oxygen to sustain her work. In her short story, "The Life You Save May Be Your Own," O'Connor writes in the third person:

> Mr. Shiftlet said that the trouble with the world was that nobody cared, or stopped and took any trouble. He said he never would have been able to teach Lucynell to say a word if he hadn't cared and stopped long enough. (O'Connor: Collected Works 177)

In writing a story of "the gravest concern" to the author, is to supply the reader with some information about the author's personal beliefs. We learn of things that touch O'Connor deeply; she cares enough to share them with us. The admissions in O'Connor's

letters allow us to realize what matters to O'Connor, what is important and time-consuming in her search for meaning. They tell us about her, while her stories, literally, do not. In Robert McGill's essay, "The Life You Write May Be Your Own: Epistolary Autobiography and the Reluctant Resurrection of Flannery O'Connor" (Southern Literary Journal 2004), he believes that, "For O'Connor, fiction represented a safer mode of expression, even if it too could be autobiographically inflected" (32). While it can be autobiographically linked, fiction provides O'Connor with a disguise, leaving her less vulnerable as an author. O'Connor does not have to respond to, nor affirm, confessional traces in the work of fiction. Fiction speaks for itself—or so she thought. O'Connor uses the genre "box" to her benefit while she simultaneously addresses its suffocating effect on authors who wish to expand its walls so that it may include unique literary characteristics.

O'Connor's fiction is a way for her to enter into a relationship with more than just her human counterparts. While emphasis is placed on human experience, the underlying messages of her work is to live a life in service of others and God. She says in a letter to A., dated 25 November 1960, "The human comes before art. You do not write the best you can for the sake of art but for the sake of returning your talent increased to the invisible God to use or not use as he sees fit" (417). If O'Connor is writing for God, in contrast to writing for the sake of art, then what she puts on the page is arguably a reflection of the self in order to enter a relationship with Him. Like in Christian confession, one self-reflects to be forgiven of sins and do penance. It is a communicative relationship with God. McGill believes that, "for a Catholic like O'Connor, to write one's life is to risk committing the sin of pride" (32); however, O'Connor does not have to

write *her* life directly or autobiographically to write in a confessional mode. McGill later says, "For O'Connor herself, art created her life as least in so far as she came to feel she was 'living' with her characters" (38).

O'Connor's writing can be considered confessional in the sense that she is writing for God—a relationship that presides over her art. In the Act of Reconciliation, a Catholic Sacrament, one confesses their sins to God and is absolved from them and reconciled with God after doing penance. Penance is most often an act that has a larger effect on humanity while preserving the self from sin. The self is redeemed through acts of grace to help others. O'Connor's writing can be interpreted as a kind of penance for sin. She is doing her best work for God, not for the sake of art, that God may then use her talent to enlighten humanity. O'Connor's fiction is a form of penance she performs to save herself while simultaneously and with the hope of, saving others. O'Connor says in one of her letters, "All of what Jung says about penance and accepting the world's sins as your own, and emphasizing evil and admitting the shadow, I can accept, because it is what I've always been taught by another source" (The Habit of Being 382). That source being the Holy Catholic Church. While O'Connor's stories expose sin and evil, much as one who confesses does, O'Connor's characters are enabled to discover redemption. The message of redemption, the vision of the Catholic Church, shared with her audience allows O'Connor to touch the lives of others in a penitential way.

McGill concurs that, "[O'Connor's] religious convictions were constantly at the forefront in her work…(32). It is important to point out further that O'Connor's religious convictions were constantly *behind* her work as well. Actually, they consumed her work. In "The Life You Save May Be Your Own," Mr. Shiftlet "felt that the rottenness of the

world was about to engulf him" (183). Likewise, O'Connor writes to alleviate the oppression of evil in the world and make a case for the Holy and the saving power of redemption. While she does this with fictional characters, O'Connor is nonetheless present in her work. O'Connor's convictions as evidenced in her essays and letters, strongly influence and manipulate her text, leaving the reader with a sense of confessional writing buried shallowly beneath the quirky characters and mysterious plots. As O'Connor's personality becomes distinct based on the tone and ideology in her letters and essays, O'Connor gives her readers a clearer picture of the person behind the authorial name. McGill says:

> For an author to offer a text to an audience under this Name is to sacrifice the text to interpretation beyond her control and to approach the edge of a slippery slope which might carry the person herself careening after the text into the public domain. As O'Connor makes a name for herself as a writer, she becomes subject to that name. (36)

O'Connor's desire to remain independent of her fiction, disallowing autobiographical interpretation, is quite unrealistic given the confessional nature of her letters and essays. Quite often, O'Connor discredits her own criticisms of autobiographical fiction, when she admits to the self's influence in her work. Writing to Louise Abbot she says, "I think there is no suffering greater than what is caused by the doubts of those who want to believe. I know what torment this is, but I can only see it, in myself anyway, as the process by which faith is deepened" (353-54). This torment described and felt by O'Connor, the process for deepening faith, can be seen in the character Bevel in "The River." Bevel is a little boy who is quickly becoming jaded by the world. Bevel takes the

name of a preacher, his real name being Harry Ashfield, as one attempt to get closer to the divine and be saved. Bevel's desperation to believe leads to his drowning as, "He intended not to fool with preachers any more but to baptize himself and to keep on going this time until he found the Kingdom of Christ in the river" (O'Connor: Collected Works 170).

In addition to O'Connor's characters' struggles to believe in a higher power, goodness, and the chance of salvation, they share logistic space as well. O'Connor is a Southern writer, persistent in her pursuit to explore this term and determine its impact on her work, despite her disfavor upon critics who are quick to cast her as a Southern writer. The force of the South as not just a region, but also as a way of being, shapes the human behavior of her characters; it resonates with them as strongly as it resonates in O'Connor, inextricably linking the two. In "The Life You Save May Be Your Own," Mr. Shiftlet "said that a man had to escape to the country to see the world whole and that he wished he lived in a desolate place like this where he could see the sun go down every evening like God made it to do" (175). O'Connor experienced "separation from the Podunk she had disparaged and so willingly left" (Wray 109) only to return with a passionate appreciation for her Southern roots. The homesickness that was felt by O'Connor in Iowa, is to Virginia Wray, author of "The Importance of Home to the Fiction of Flannery O'Connor," an "explanation for her use of explicit personal experience and an overt newfound Southernness in several of the surviving fragments of the Iowa period" (110).

For a Southerner like O'Connor, her life-blood was deeply rooted in her native origins; the South, along with the Catholic Church, were her focal points. When removed from "home," O'Connor was pulled back with magnetic force to the inspirational locale

that sustained her beliefs in the world. In O'Connor's essay, "The Catholic Novelist in the Protestant South" (O'Connor: Collected Works), she speaks on her discovery that home is vital, yet binding, to her creativity:

> The discovery of having his senses respond to a particular society and a particular history, to particular sounds and a particular idiom, is for the Southern writer the beginning of a recognition that first puts his work in real human perspective for him. He discovers that the imagination is *not* free, but bound. The energy of the South is so strong in him that it is a force which has to be encountered and engaged, and it is when this is a true engagement that its meaning will lead outward to universal human interest. (856-57)

O'Connor must look to her interiority, the energy of the South burning within. Becoming engaged with her interiority, facing the interior self, O'Connor can transfer personal human experience to fictional characters who seek recognition and generate "universal human interest." O'Connor's allegiance to the South in her fiction is every bit confessional as her letters are. When the South breathes life into a person and provides meaning, its expression unknowingly produces an expression of the self. For O'Connor, the South holds up a mirror, prompting recognition and sending her home to the place she knows: the heart of her self. Upon returning, Wray points out that, "O'Connor was able to finally see the South's inherent 'sacramental view of life—a view in which material things are outward signs of divine gifts, ... and in which matter must be penetrated to its depths before spirit can be found'" (113).

O'Connor, then, understands the importance of introspection, a steadfast peering look within in order to reveal truths and catch a glimpse of the spirit. O'Connor is immortalized through her fiction, letters, and essays. They speak her truth; they speak her life; they speak her being. They simply speak. And in speaking, imparting the self to the world, O'Connor communicates her vision. While her writing resists the personal, we nevertheless come to know some things about Flannery O'Connor.

Chapter Six: Conclusion

In his book The Pound Era (1971), Hugh Kenner recognizes that literature adheres to a pattern that persists throughout time and place. Genre separates literature, while the messages unify. He says, "All ways of telling the same story are homeomorphic, even the way that ingeniously lets us suppose that the teller has been removed" (33). The pattern remains: searching for meaning, leading to self-discovery even if that self-discovery is bound to a fictional character. One who writes observes, associates, and internalizes to make sense of the world and the self's position in the world. Thoughts recorded on paper confess an author's intentions in writing and also, supply the reader with hope. It is possible to forge a meaningful existence out of chaos and questioning. Kenner notes, "[P]eople live in stories that structure their worlds .... whoever can give his people better stories than the ones they live in is like the priest in whose hands common bread and wine become capable of feeding the very soul..." (39).

Many of us seek stories that unite us as the great human race; likewise, authors write stories to feel part of the human race. We like being spoken to; we like speaking to others. *How* we do that comes through in many different forms; yet, the ultimate goal is communication. Literary genres differ in style and craft while they retain their principle of expression: to communicate ideas, emotions, and facts. Kenner cites a metaphor of Ezra Pound's in the realization that authors adhere to a universal pattern, only choosing different forms of literary expression:

> [A]nd it was natural for Pound in 1911 to compare ... a shelf of books by Homer, Dante, Guido, Chaucer, Shakespeare, to an array of engines each designed "to gather the latent energy of Nature and focus it on a certain

> resistance. The latent energy is made dynamic or 'revealed' to the engineer in control, and placed at his disposal." Electric engines, steam engines, gas engines all do this, "all designed for more or less the same end, none 'better,' none 'worse,' all different[.]" ... And as one cannot hope to understand each engine by calling some ugly and some pretty, but only by attending to their way of gathering and concentrating the latent energy of Nature, so one can begin to understand painting or literature by ... attending to the moments when new dispositions of vital energy become available. (155)

I do not understand literature more or less if it is called poetry, fiction, memoir, creative non-fiction, autobiography, or the various sub-genres available for craftsmanship. When an author speaks to me from the heart and soul of his being, I want to understand and feel a connection. While this connection between author and reader may be a feeling, not a reality, it is nonetheless valuable. The mode the author chooses to speak in is irrelevant, while I can appreciate that authors embrace literary genres that lend themselves to what they have to say and they can say it best in one form as opposed to another. Alice Sebold's fictional novel, The Lovely Bones, about a young girl brutally raped and murdered was no less riveting and revealing than her memoir, Lucky, a work that recounts graphic details of her own rape as a college freshman and life thereafter. Sebold's two works are an example of "the fact that self-interfering patterns persist while new ways of shaping breath flow through them" (Kenner 149).

Confessionalism is vague. Vague, because not every author staunchly announces, "This story is about me. It is my life." Nor does every other write a story about his or her

life. In fact, rarely does an author disclose any personal information, unless of course one is writing autobiography, personal lyric poetry, or memoir. However, even then we cannot be so sure that what is revealed is accurate or true. Memory is powerful, but it is also faulty at times. Patricia Hampl believes that, "no memoirist writes for long without experiencing an unsettling disbelief about the reliability of memory" (22). It is because we question the reliability of memory, that confession becomes so powerful. While we may question the accuracy of what is remembered, we do not question what is stated. Once it is said with conviction, with a voice, it is communicated. What is heard and felt triumphs over accuracy. While Sebold says in her memoir, Lucky, "that memory could save, that it had power, that it was often the only recourse of the powerless, the oppressed, or the brutalized," memory also challenges its own capabilities of accurate and chronological recollection (106). If memory alone cannot serve us, one turns to confessionalism for healing and life-saving power. By speaking or writing our past and experiences into existence, confessing them, we can close the gap between one human being and the next. In saving ourselves from a life depleted of meaning, we can help save one another.

Perhaps confessionalism is vague because we are looking too hard for the personal "I" that distinguishes the narrative voice. Joyce Carol Oates says in her essay, "Why We Write, Why We Read," that "the writing with which others identify most readily is usually stimulated by something 'real' and its ideal mode of expression is first person narration: 'I'" (Telling Stories xiv). Confessionalism is not limited to "I," nor does it always require it. Confessionalism is omnipresent, sometimes quietly behind the scenes, provoking a story to be told for reasons personal to the storyteller. Regardless of

genre, the writer is telling us something about him or herself based on what is written. There is something he or she wants to share for artistic reasons, yes, but for personal reasons also. Genre requires artistry; the message requires personal history.

And heart. Heart is behind confessionalism, as it is behind writing itself. Hampl defines the heart as "the boss." "Its commands," she says, "are what the writer obeys—often without knowing it" (23). The commands of the heart supply the writer with material for work that is molded and crafted into a specific genre of literature. The material is a reflection of the heart's innermost thoughts, insights, and knowledge; what the writer puts on the page is a reflection of the self, done consciously or unconsciously, but nevertheless revealing. D.H. Lawrence has said, "Trust the writing, not the writer" (qtd. in Oates xv). Oates expounds upon Lawrence, adding, "[F]or the writer as an individual is ... not to know the simplest truth about his or her deepest self—a truth any attentive reader might easily discern from reading the work" (xv). So when Flannery O'Connor resists being labeled confessional or autobiographical, repudiating and admonishing critics for suggesting so, it may not be irresponsible of the reader to extract autobiographical elements from her letters and juxtapose them with her fiction to make conclusions about O'Connor the person.

When, in a letter to Cecil Dawkins (6 Sept. 1962), O'Connor expresses a distinction between "thought-knowledge" and "felt-knowledge," one may conclude that O'Connor relied on the heart more than she acknowledged or even realized. "Felt-knowledge" was important to her writing. She says in the letter, "I don't want to go on to higher mathematics, but to people I know" (The Habit of Being 491). O'Connor used the heart and its intimacies to write fictional stories based on the "felt-knowledge" she

possessed. Sharing the "felt-knowledge" with her audience, she shared a bit of the interiority of her own heart, perhaps unconsciously, which could be one account for her reluctance to admit to confessional writing. Hampl believes that, "More than a story, we want a voice speaking softly, urgently, in our ear. Which is to say, our heart" ("Red Sky in the Morning" 17). We want a connection. Whether the connection is developed consciously or unconsciously, writing with "felt-knowledge" provokes it.

The conscious self and the unconscious self appear in the work of Sontag's fictional short stories. In Sontag's dual selves present in her writing, the narrative self and the reflective self, Sontag wrests out a layered confessionalism wherein the narrative self says, "Confession is me, knowledge is everybody" ("Project for a Trip to China" 5). The reflective self, Sontag, writes to discover the "me" who will form relationships with "everybody," thus gleaning knowledge from knowing the self in relation to the world. Hampl puts it more clearly saying, "My narrative self (the culprit who invented) wishes to be discovered by my reflective self, the self who wants to understand and makes sense [of experiences]" (24).

Confusing, yes. Confessionalism may be a response to confusion, as one confesses to bring things to order. In addition, through craft and chosen literary devices, confessionalism adds a quality to writing that brings writer and reader together to share an intimate experience. Intimacy, ignited from a connection, is essential to human existence. Confession takes reader and writer on a journey together and at the end of the journey, a relationship exists and an idea of the self is brought more clearly into view. Transformation occurs as a former self, perhaps the narrative self, and the present self, the reflective self, converge. When Sontag says, "Confession is me, knowledge is

everybody," the goal is to move beyond the narrative self who confesses, to arrive at the reflective self who emerges as a result of having confessed and has entered into a relationship with others. Knowledge springs forth from that relationship. Hampl views literature as "an attempt to find not only a self but a world" (26).

How one finds the self and a world through literature is a matter of personal choice. For some, there is great importance placed on personal experiences. Truth seekers ("This really happened. It's a true story.") gravitate towards autobiography, memoir, and personal lyric poetry. For others, fictional people and events symbolize truth and hold greater meaning because they explore possibilities. Their stories give us hope. How we respond when authors mix personal experiences with proclaimed fiction, or fictive experiences with personal accounts is problematic. It forces one to look closely at the genre of the work in question to define it. And when the genre places limitations on inventive, creative storytelling, the confessional voice must carry the story into our hearts, where we can embrace the truth it speaks to us. Above genre, one must focus on the message. Whether the confessional voice is speaking in poetry, fiction, autobiography, or memoir, there are truths to be taken from the voice itself. While there is ambiguity in the degree of truth we want to read, one thing is for certain: we want to read what someone has cared enough to tell us. Value and self-worth come from knowing we are important enough to be spoken to; we belong.

Works Cited

Aleshire, Joan. "Staying News: A Defense of the Lyric." After Confession: Poetry as Autobiography. Eds. Kate Sontag and David Graham. Saint Paul, MN: Graywolf P, 2001.

Barbato, Joseph. "Gregory Orr: Fields of Redemption." Publishers Weekly 249.37 (2002): 47-48. Academic Search Premier, EBSCO, State U of New York, Brockport, Drake Memorial Lib., 20 Apr. 2007 <http://ezproxy.drake.brockport.edu>.

Bidart, Frank. "Confessional." The Sacrifice. New York: Random House, 1979. 34-55.

---. "For the Twentieth Century." Eds. Michael Collier and Stanley Plumly. The New Bread Loaf Anthology of Contemporary American Poetry. Hanover, NH: Bread Loaf Writers' Conference and Middlebury College P by UP of New England, 1999. 23-24.

---. "Legacy." Collier and Plumly 24-25.

Bleakley, Alan. "Writing With Invisible Ink: Narrative, Confessionalism, and Reflective Practice." Reflective Practice 1.1 (2000): 11-24. Academic Search Premier, EBSCO, State U of New York, Brockport, Drake Memorial Lib. 14 Sept. 2006. <http://ezproxy.drake.brockport.edu>.

Cuddon, J.A. Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory. London: Penguin Books, 1998. 174-75.

Gill, Jo. "Anne Sexton and Confessional Poetics." Review of English Studies 55.220 (2004): 425-445, Oxford Journals, Oxford UP, 17 Apr. 2007 <http://res.oxfordjournals.org/cgi/repnnt/55/220/425>.

Graham, David, and Kate Sontag. "Containing Multitudes." After Confession: Poetry as Autobiography. Eds. Kate Sontag and David Graham. Saint Paul, MN: Graywolf P, 2001.

Gray, Jeffrey. "'Necessary Thought:' Frank Bidart and the Postconfessional." Contemporary Literature 34.4 (Winter 1993): 714-739. JSTOR, State U of New York, Brockport, Drake Memorial Lib., 14 Sept. 2006 <http://www.jstor.org/>.

Gregerson, Linda. "Ben Jonson and the Loathed Word." Green Thoughts, Green Shades: Essays by Contemporary Poets on the Early Modern Lyric. Ed. Jonathan F.S. Post. Berkeley: U of California P, 2002. 86-108.

---. Negative Capability: Contemporary American Poetry. Ann Arbor: The U of Michigan P, 2001.

---. "Read Me a Riddle: The Light and Darkness of Poetic Form." Planet on the Table: Poets on the Reading Life. Eds. Sharon Bryan and William Olsen. Louisville, KY: Sarabande Books, 2003. 189-201.

---. "Rhetorical Contract in the Lyric Poem." Kenyon Review 28.2 (2006): 161-78.

---. The Woman Who Died in Her Sleep. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1996.

---. Waterborne. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2002.

Hampl, Patricia. "Memory and Imagination." I Could Tell You Stories: Sojourns in the Land of Memory. New York: W. W. Norton, 1999. 21-37.

---. "Red Sky in the Morning." I Could Tell You Stories: Sojourns in the Land of Memory. New York: W. W. Norton, 1999. 15-20.

Hoffman, Steven K. "The Making of Confessional Poetic." ELH 45.4 (1978): 687-709.

Academic Search Premier, EBSCO, State U of New York, Brockport, Drake Memorial Lib., 16 Apr. 2007 <http://ezproxy.drake.brockport.edu>.

Lazer, Hank. "Gregory Orr: Resources of the Personal Lyric." American Poetry Review 32.6 (2003): 43-51. Academic Search Premier, EBSCO, State U of New York, Brockport, Drake Memorial Lib., 20 Apr. 2007 <http://ezproxy.drake.brockport.edu>.

McGill, Robert. "The Life You Write May Be Your Own: Epistolary Autobiography And the Reluctant Resurrection of Flannery O'Connor." Southern Literary Journal 36.2 (2004): 31-46. Academic Search Premier, EBSCO, State U of New York, Brockport, Drake Memorial Lib., 30 Sept. 2006 <http://ezproxy.drake.brockport.edu>.

Oates, Joyce Carol. Introduction. Telling Stories: Anthology for Writers. Ed. Joyce Carol Oates. New York: W.W. Norton, 1998. xiii-xvii.

O'Connor, Flannery. "A Good Man is Hard to Find." A Good Man is Hard to Find. O'Connor: Collected Works. New York: The Library of America, 1988. 137-153.

---. "Good Country People." A Good Man is Hard to Find. O'Connor: Collected Works 263-284.

---. "Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction." Stories and Occasional Prose. O'Connor: Collected Works 813-821.

---. "The Catholic Novelist in the Protestant South." Stories and Occasional Prose. O'Connor: Collected Works 853-864.

---. The Habit of Being. Ed. Sally Fitzgerald. New York: Vintage Books, 1980.

---. "The Life You Save May Be Your Own." A Good Man is Hard to Find.

O'Connor: Collected Works 172-183.

---. "The River." A Good Man is Hard to Find. O'Connor: Collected Works 154-171.

Orr, Gregory. The Blessing: A Memoir. San Francisco: Council Oak Books, 2002.

---. Poetry as Survival. Athens: U of Georgia P, 2002.

---. "The Poet's Choice: Lyric or Narrative." Poetry Review 111.7 (1998): 13-15. Academic Search Premier, EBSCO, State U of New York, Brockport, Drake Memorial Lib., 21 Apr. 2007 <http://ezproxy.drake.brockport.edu>.

---. The Caged Owl. Port Townsend, Washington: Copper Canyon P, 2002.

Rosenthal, M.L. The New Poets: American and British Poetry Since World War II. New York: Oxford UP, 1976.

Sabean, David Warren. "Production of the Self during the Age of Confessionalism." Central European History 29.1 (2001): 1-18. Academic Search Premier, EBSCO, State U of New York, Brockport, Drake Memorial Lib., 14 Sept. 2006 <http://ezproxy.drake.brockport.edu>.

Sebold, Alice. Lucky. New York: Little, Brown and Co., 1999.

---. The Lovely Bones. New York: Little, Brown and Co., 2002.

Skloot, Floyd. "Bearing Sorrow." The Southern Review 39.1 (2003): 219-234. Academic Search Premier, EBSCO, Stae U of New York, Brockport, Drake Memorial Lib., 21 Apr. 2007 <http://ezproxy.drake.brockport.edu>.

Sontag, Susan. "Against Interpretation." Against Interpretation and Other Essays. New York: Anchor Books, 1961.

---. "A Mind in Mourning." Where the Stress Falls. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001.

---. “A Poet’s Prose.” Where the Stress Falls. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001.

---. I, etcetera. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1978.

---. In America. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2000.

---. “Singleness.” Where the Stress Falls. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001.

---. “Thirty Years Later.” Where the Stress Falls. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001.

---. “Where the Stress Falls.” Where the Stress Falls. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001.

---. “Writing as Reading.” Where the Stress Falls. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001.

Tamas, G.M. “Susan Sontag.” Common Knowledge 11.3 (2005): 365. Academic Search Premier, EBSCO, State U of New York, Brockport, Drake Memorial Lib., 30 Sept. 2006 <http://ezproxy.drake.brockport.edu>.

Wray, Virginia. “The Importance of Home to the Fiction of Flannery O’Connor.” Renascence 47.2 (1995): 102-116. Academic Search Premier, EBSCO, State U of New York, Brockport, Drake Memorial Lib., 1 Oct. 2006 <http://ezproxy.drake.brockport.edu>.