



Bodies and self-disclosure in American female confessional poetry

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Abstract

Far from being a mere thematic device, the body plays a crucial role in poetry, especially for modern women poets. The inward turn to an intimate autobiographical dimension, which is commonly seen as characteristic of female writing, usually complies with the requests of feminist theorists, urging writers to reconquer their identity through the assertion of their bodies. However, inscribing the body in verse is often problematic, since it frequently emerges from a complicated interaction between positive self-redefinition, life writing, and the confession of trauma. This is especially true for authors writing under the influence of the American confessional trend, whose biographies were often scarred by mental illness and self-destructive inclinations. This paper assesses the role of the body in the representation of the self in a selection of texts by American women poets—namely Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, Elizabeth Bishop, Adrienne Rich, and Louise Glück—where the body and its disclosure act as vehicles for a heterogeneous redefinition of the female identity.

Keywords: Body, Confessional poetry, Self-disclosure, Life writing, Women poets

Abstract

Lungi dal configurarsi come mero nodo tematico, la corporeità esercita un ruolo fondamentale nella lirica, in special modo per le poetesse del Novecento. In queste poetiche, il ripiegamento introspettivo verso una dimensione intima e autobiografica, comunemente considerata una caratteristica della scrittura al femminile, sembra assecondare le spinte di orientamento teorico femminista a riconquistare una propria identità, attraverso l'affermazione della propria dimensione corporea. Tuttavia, inscrivere il corpo nel testo è un atto che presenta spesso risvolti problematici, poiché emerge frequentemente da una complessa interazione tra ridefinizione di sé, scrittura intima e confessione del trauma. Tale è il caso delle poetesse legate in vario modo alla Confessional poetry statunitense, donne le cui vicende biografiche erano state talvolta segnate da patologie mentali o inclinazioni autodistruttive. Questo saggio intende discutere il ruolo della corporeità nella rappresentazione del soggetto lirico confrontando una selezione di testi di poetesse statunitensi – nella fattispecie, Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, Elizabeth Bishop, Adrienne Rich e Louise Glück – in cui il corpo e il suo disvelamento si configurano a vario titolo come veicoli di una ridefinizione eterogenea dell'identità femminile.

Parole chiave: corpo, poesia Confessional, disvelamento, scrittura intima, poesia femminile

As readers, we have been inclined to approach the lyric as an act of self-revelation and self-disclosure, ever since the Romantics' glorification of the Self as the essence of modern poetry. The inward turn to an intimate autobiographical dimension that lyrics project onto the page is now regarded as rather conventional by the general appreciator of poetry. This interpretation of the lyric juxtaposes issues of gender and genre. In fact, the introspective motion is often considered a characterizing feature of women's poetry, and women poets, in comparison to their male counterparts, are more likely to be dismissed as merely writing about personal vicissitudes.¹ Nevertheless, in modern women's poetry, self-disclosure is not to be regarded as a spontaneous outflow of private emotions; rather, it is often a subversive act aimed at a conscious negotiation of an autonomous identity, while employing an expressive medium traditionally controlled by men. At the level of genre, this same spark of subversive self-disclosure ignited the American confessional poetic trend that caused much outrage in the repressive context of the Cold War and the McCarthy era, due to its focus on transgressive subjects such as mental illness, sex, and substance abuse.

Grounded in feminist and psychoanalytical criticism, this paper will discuss self-disclosure in a number of female confessional poets—namely Elizabeth Bishop, Anne Sexton, Adrienne Rich, Sylvia Plath, and Louise Glück—by delving into one of the key metaphors of their poetics: the representation of the body, particularly the writer's own body, and its role in the redefinition of the self.

1. 'More body, hence more writing'

Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies [...]. Woman must put herself into the text—as into the world and into history—by her own movement. (Cixous 1976, 875)

These are the opening lines of one of the leading manifestoes in the history of the feminist movement, *The Laugh of the Medusa* (1976) by French theorist Hélène Cixous.² Written in the long aftermath of the revolutionary events of May 1968, this essay passionately urges women writers to reclaim their own right to language and expression, while demonizing the effects of masculine and patriarchal control over the linguistic medium—a phenomenon widely known as 'phallogocentrism'. On the contrary, Cixous advocates for an alternative, intrinsically feminine mode of writing ('écriture féminine', 'feminine writing'), claiming that this liberating discourse, which stems from a recognized marginal position, would progressively overcome the constraints of phallogocentrism and grant women the linguistic authority that they were denied and the voice that was regularly silenced. By summoning the image of the Medusa, the mythological Gorgon with a crown of snakes and a petrifying gaze,³ Cixous addresses the infamous naturalization of the female as a castrating agent, as a dangerous 'dark continent' (Cixous 1976, 878). Conversely, she encourages women to thrive in that 'dark continent', advising them to use their body as a powerful tool to express their identity and their creative force:

Women must write *through their bodies*, they must invent the impregnable language that will wreck partitions, classes, and rhetorics, regulations and codes, they must submerge, cut through, get beyond the ultimate reserve-discourse. (Cixous 1976, 886; my emphasis)

The individual female body, the 'uncanny stranger' (Cixous 1976, 880), is thus prompted to become the source of inspiration for writing; it becomes the pivot for the necessary redefinition of the female subject and her self-narrative. According to

Cixous, the act of writing would give the woman 'access to her native strength; it will give her back her goods, her pleasures, her organs, her immense bodily territories which have been kept under seal' (Cixous 1976, 880). Therefore, by linking the female body to the necessity of (re)writing their own history, Cixous urges women to 'return to the body' in order to 'write your self' (Cixous 1976, 880), thereby bridging the gap between a woman's right to reclaim her sexuality and her equal right to reclaim authorship. As a result, in Cixous's essay, the female body and the body of writing are deeply interconnected: 'more body, hence more writing' (Cixous 1976, 886), she proclaims.

While many theorists criticized this essay⁴, accusing Cixous of essentializing female sexuality in its biological foundations, it may be argued that, for Cixous, body and writing are simply correlates: the body is embedded into culture and into linguistic mediums, and it exists within writing:

[The woman] doesn't "speak," she throws her trembling body forward; she lets go of herself, she flies; all of her passes into her voice, and it's with her body that she vitally supports the "logic" of her speech. [...] She lays herself bare. In fact, she physically materializes what she's thinking; she signifies it with her body. (Cixous 1976, 881)

It is conceivable, however, that this urge to return to the body and to write through it may have led to certain misinterpretations. This attention to the supposedly unmediated relationship between the female body and female writing—the same relationship that motivated others to accuse Cixous of essentialism—could have encouraged critics and readers to assume that women actually write *themselves*. The gender bias that assumes women mostly speak and write about personal issues has in fact a long history⁵: in 1910, the poet Margaret Sackville exposed the issue in her introduction to *A Book of Verse by Living Women*, a collection of poetic texts written by female authors of that time:

There is still too often the feeling that the poet is expressing, very admirably it may be, emotions and ideas which have been read and heard of, but which are often no more than vivid reflections. To some, women's poetry is a glass reflecting nothing but themselves, not a still pool of living water wherein the stars and skies are mirrored. (Sackville 1910, xii)

Although many modern poets, irrespective of gender, have been interpreted as writing about personal experiences, this equation has been particularly robust with women authors: a presumably heightened attention for sentiments, as well as for the personal and the intimate, was the feature that allowed for an enduring distinction between female poets and the male canon. As Alicia Ostriker (1987) highlights, female writers employed tropes such as introspection, the quest for self-definition, intimacy and sexuality, the experience of the body, and unfiltered self-representation. As a consequence, Ostriker argues that ‘the women write personally’ (1987, 47) and that ‘when a woman poet today says “I”, she is likely to mean herself, as intensely as her imagination and her verbal skills permit’ (1987, 12). However, the correlation between female authors and introspective, personal, and autobiographical writings effectively limits the array of poetic material to draw upon, and, ultimately, it contributes to their perceived autoreferentiality and ghettoization. Nevertheless, a number of American writers in the second half of the 20th century did in fact write personally, often assuming their own corporeal experience as a starting point for poetic expression and self-definition, just as Cixous urged to do. In their poetry, however, the concept of the body enjoyed a multifaceted range of interpretations and purposes.

2. Confessional poetry and the autobiographical impulse

The unmediated expression of emotional material—something many perceive as peculiar to the female approach to poetry—entails introspection, which compels the writer, any writer, to face unpleasant psychological issues. In the late 1950s and 1960s, the considerable interest in troubling private psychological matters—and, more importantly, the impulse to expose them in the arts—began to cast its shadow over several American writers, who were labelled ‘confessional’⁶. Although they never constituted a movement or even a group⁷—unlike the Black Mountain poets or the Beats—the so-called confessional poets emerged around Robert Lowell’s poetry writing classes at Boston University and Harvard. In fact, Lowell’s collection *Life Studies* (1959) is widely regarded as the first example of confessional style. As an extremely intimate and overt description of Lowell’s inner turmoil and mental anguish, *Life Studies* marked a heavy shift away from the late modernist poetic tradition and its diktat of impersonality. Although highly criticized for its choice of content and style, this epoch-defining poetic trend came to encompass, with various degrees of affinity, writers such as Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, John Berryman, W.D. Snodgrass, Elizabeth Bishop, Theodore Roethke, and others. Collectively, they

exercised an unparalleled effect on the concept of self-revelation in American literature during the second half of the 20th century, in spite of the trend being considered exhausted by the mid-1970s (Nelson 2013, 32). Arising from the need to confess private emotions and destructive torments—often rooted in the author’s real experiences—this introspective poetry was perceived as utterly sincere and authentic. Aside from matters of linguistic form and style, this was mainly due to the poems’ shameful contents, their transgressive aim for self-exposure, and their resemblance to the writer’s own history of mental illness, problematic sexuality, and suicidal tendencies.

Thanks to its unquestionable evocative power, the term ‘confessional’ places this style of modern poetry into a much wider literary tradition, one whose lineage dates back to Augustine’s *Confessiones* (397-400 AD) and also to Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Confessions* (1782-1789). The act of confessing in writing thus establishes a connection between modern poetry and the extended domain of life writing. Sackville’s remark about reflecting one’s own image in writing is generally understood as core to lyric poetry, but that same core is shared by narrative forms of life writing, such as autobiographies or memoirs. Nevertheless, in being a lyric form instead of narrative, confessional poetry is bound to problematize the issue of the generic boundaries of the autobiographical discourse, an issue that is extremely opaque and slippery in the first place. The unstable nature of autobiography led critics like Sidonie Smith to claim that the more we focus and try to grasp the meaning of it, the more it slips away: ‘as more and more critics talk about autobiography, the sense of its generic conventions, even its very definition, has begun to blur’ (Smith 1987, 3). Although most studies commonly proceed from Philippe Lejeune’s classical definition of autobiography as ‘a retrospective prose narrative produced by a real person concerning his own existence, focusing on his individual life, in particular on the development of his personality’ (Lejeune 1982, 193), more recent theories prefer to focus on the ‘pervasive’ and hybrid nature of the impulse to self-narration (Anderson 2001, 2), rather than on autobiography per se. It thus follows that any text can potentially display an autobiographical nature, since it is always produced by an author whose subjectivity, personality, and experiences pervade the text to various degrees of explicitness. The act of self-revelation, in its pervasive nature, blurs the edges around different life writing genres. In this sense, following Paul de Man’s assertion that autobiography ‘is not a genre or a mode, but a figure of reading or of understanding that occurs, to some degree, in all texts’ (1979, 921), we can appreciate autobiography as not restricted to any form or genre.

Therefore, following this line of thought, poetic self-expression could fit into the array of autobiographical writings⁸. In fact, Western lyric tradition has been typically read as expressive of the author's lived experience, an interpretation which is epitomized by Wordsworth's autobiographical account in *The Prelude* (1850), which also exemplifies the intersection between modern lyric and life writing. More than a century later, American confessional poetry can be viewed as sharing with the lyric tradition that same core of self-revelation through the expression of emotive states. However, the advent of modern psychoanalysis and its therapeutic aims, along with some cultural and social contingencies in the general context of the Cold War,⁹ set a striking divergence from Romantic lyrics: in the 20th century, what the Romantics had conceived as a spontaneous outpouring of the poet's emotions transforms into a self-conscious and often performative act of disclosing one's personal thoughts and traumas. For Deborah Nelson, 'what makes confessional poetry confessional', and not merely personal or autobiographical, is 'the nature and context of its revelations' (Nelson 2013, 34). She refers to the urgent and raw nature of the revelations embedded in the texts, those shameful intimate issues that were previously confined to the domain of the confession—to the analyst or to the priest—that are now transposed to public utterance:

The revelations of confessional poetry were extreme and transgressive, particularly with respect to norms of white, middle-class, heterosexual society. Sexton, Lowell, Plath, Berryman, Snodgrass made poems about marital failure and infidelity, (hetero)sexual transgression, abortion, rage, mental illness, and drug and alcohol abuse. (Nelson 2013, 34)

Therefore, confessional poetry entails different implications from traditional lyric poetry, namely the transgressive quality of the material that is being disclosed and unveiled, but also the trivial nature of the issues that are revealed through the poetic medium: psychological traumas and domestic troubles that seldom possess a collective, let alone universal, significance (Nelson 2013, 35). Moreover, in placing 'few barriers, if any, between his self and direct expression of that self', the confessional poet offers 'the naked emotion direct, personally rather than impersonally' (Phillips 1973, 8). The metaphor of unveiling and undressing, with the purpose of telling the naked truth, leads directly to the primary symbol of confessional poetry: the body, in its raw and exhibitionist nudity.

3. Unveiling the female

By shedding light on material corporeity, confessional poetry becomes a writing of the body, 'often in its most degraded or vulnerable states' (Nelson 2013, 34). Vulnerability is precisely what Lant (1993) emphasizes as the meaning of the female body in confessional poems written by women. Concentrating on Sylvia Plath's poetry in particular, she argues that the naked female body is 'an embarrassing reminder of the self's failures, an icon of the poet's vulnerability', a metaphor that 'reminds us only that the female self is unworthy, inadequate, and—ultimately—vulnerable rather than ascendant' (1993, 625), in significant contrast to the male body, which instead is an emblem of freedom and power. In fact, she claims that the representation of the body acts in different ways according to the poet's gender:

The unclothed male body is—in terms of the dominant figurative systems of Western discourse—powerful in that it is sexually potent, sexually armed; the naked female body is—again, in terms of the figurative systems which dominate this period—vulnerable in that it is sexually accessible, susceptible to penetration, exploitation, rape, pregnancy. (Lant 1993, 626)

As a matter of fact, artistic reproductions of the female body often feature a gendered perspective that frequently aligns with patriarchal ideologies. Visual and aesthetic theories tend to group the masculine commodification of the female body under the label of 'male gaze' (Mulvey 1975): according to this concept, women's bodies are always positioned as (naked) objects of visual consumption in a sexually polarized environment. Such an environment responds to a phallogocentric psychoanalytic framework which is epitomized in Freudian theories, where the female body and the female identity were interpreted in terms of an absence, as opposed to the phallic model. As a consequence, this view of women as lacking subjects came to reflect their social and political identity—or lack thereof; they did not possess a social and political position, representation, properties, or even a voice. With the political and socio-cultural turmoil of the 1960s and 1970s, the psychoanalytic consideration of women and of female sexuality changed quite remarkably in response to the new feminist urges (Chodorow 2012). Phallogocentric theories began to fall apart in favor of theories of female sexuality that encompassed a richer and more complex approach to women's autonomous sexual development, without comparing it to the male counterpart.

Still, the female body is usually connoted by the presence of something deeply internal and mysterious. Even though part of this conception may be due to female anatomical characteristics that differ from the male body, it also reflects the socio-cultural construction of women as a 'dark continent', which Cixous denounced. The female body is thus deeply interconnected with the idea of boundary, of an in-between space that separates the private from the public, the concealed internal nature from the external world. In this regard, confessional poets may be understood as writers who unveiled and exposed the female body, doing so within a context of general repression. By speaking overtly about shameful subjects, and thus by refusing to maintain silence and decorum over private matters, these poets challenged the reader in a process of self-analysis and self-redefinition: the symbol of the body thus became the theater where such a definition of identity was enacted. Moreover, it is no surprise that the female side of the confessional cohort was more likely to approach poetry writing as a means to negotiate identity: Sandra Gilbert argues that 'the self-defining confessional genre, with its persistent assertions of identity and its emphasis on a central mythology of the self, may be (at least for our own time) a distinctively female poetic mode' (Gilbert 1977, 444). Although many preferred not to recognize their affinity to the confessional label, writers like Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, Elizabeth Bishop, Adrienne Rich, and—to a certain extent—Louise Glück, among others, wrote within the confessional frame of reference and were also active during the second feminist wave. In situating themselves as subjects, these poets took possession of masculine cultural models and attempted to shape their own subjectivity, both in its vulnerable and self-assertive states. Therefore, in their poetry, the body becomes a site of cultural redefinition of the subject. In reaction to masculine ideological constructions of the 'female', women's creativity stages a performance of the self which necessarily embraces and exploits the symbol of the body in its multifaceted meanings, as 'biological entity, psycho-sexual construction, cultural product', as Peter Brooks argues (1993, xii). In what follows, we will thus assess the role of the body in the representation of the self in selected texts by the abovementioned American women poets who, despite sharing a sort of apprenticeship in the confessional mode, managed to inscribe acts of self-disclosure and self-definition in their poetry, to different extents and with different outcomes.

4. Expressing the body

'In the Waiting Room' (1976) by Elizabeth Bishop (1911-1979) centers on the search for identity from the perspective of a young girl. The complexity of being a girl is

here articulated with the idea of inhabiting a body that is destined to undergo significant and seemingly inexplicable changes. In addition, this poem highlights the inextricable bond that ties the perception of one's gendered identity with possessing a peculiarly sexual body. The speaker of the poem is a seven-year-old girl who has accompanied her aunt to the dentist's; she is patiently sitting in the waiting room and browsing the *National Geographic*. Suddenly, she becomes horrified at the sight of naked tribe women, and especially of their 'horrifying' (31) breasts. Her captivated reading is interrupted by an exclamation of pain coming from the dentist's office; in recognizing her aunt's voice, the girl is suddenly startled by her unexpected identification with her. This unconscious reaction is not experienced as empathic, or even sympathetic; rather, it is perceived through an uncanny corporeal identification:

Suddenly, from the inside,
came an oh! of pain
— Aunt Consuelo's voice—
not very loud or long. [...]
I might have been embarrassed,
but wasn't. What took me
completely by surprise
was that it was *me*:
my voice, in my mouth.
Without thinking at all
I was my foolish aunt,
I—we—were falling, falling,
our eyes glued to the cover
of the *National Geographic* (36-39, 43-52; Bishop 2011, 180)

It is as if the girl realized all of a sudden that like her foolish aunt and the tribe woman, she too is female and will become, in due time, a woman. Gradually, the text evolves into a meditation on the inevitable biological development and psycho-psychological rite of passage that a girl has to tolerate to become a woman. In this sense, the waiting room also stands for the liminal space of puberty, characterized by the expectation of growth into adulthood. Her realization is both surprising and terrifying: her sense of 'falling, falling' (50) reflects her loss of control over the experience of herself, although she tries to 'glue' her eyes back to the cover of the magazine. In the next stanza, she tries to regasp a sense of self and rationalize the feeling that she is experiencing:

I said to myself: three days
and you'll be seven years old.
I was saying it to stop
the sensation of falling off
the round, turning world
into cold, blue-black space.
But I felt: you are an *I*,
you are an *Elizabeth*,
you are one of *them*. (54-62; Bishop 2011, 180)

By naming herself, by feeling that she is 'an *I*' (60), she tries to reclaim a sense of autonomous identity, to hamper her impression of losing the margins in the uncanny identification with her aunt. At the same time as she tries to define herself in opposition to other people ('Why should you be one, too?', 63), she wonders whether her biological predetermination will make her identical to her aunt, to the people in the waiting room, and to the tribe woman in the magazine.

Why should I be my aunt,
or me, or anyone?
What similarities—
boots, hands, the family voice
I felt in my throat, or even
the *National Geographic*
and those awful hanging breasts—
held us all together
or made us all just one? (75-83; Bishop 2011, 181)

In her thoughts, she emphasizes 'those awful hanging breasts' (81), thus perceiving the adult female body as something strange and horrifying; hence, the breasts epitomize the changes that will occur in her body in its passage to adulthood. While it is quite obvious to characterize the female body with breasts, it is worth noting that Bishop also focuses on the mouth: 'it was me:/my voice, in my mouth' (46-47). Here, Bishop establishes a parallel between the painful 'invasion' of the dentist in the aunt's mouth and the girl's acquaintance with her body, therefore highlighting the profound connection between female body, female identity, and female vocal and creative agency.

The uncanny experience of the female self, as grasped through its corporeal dimension, is also expressed by Anne Sexton (1928-1974). In 'Self in 1958' (1958-1965), she writes:

What is reality?
I am a plaster doll; I pose
with eyes that cut open without landfall or nightfall
upon some shellacked and grinning person,
eyes that open, blue, steel, and close.
Am I approximately an I. Magnin transplant?
I have hair, black angel,
black-angel-stuffing to comb,
nylon legs, luminous arms
and some advertised clothes. (1-10; Sexton 1988, 106)

This first stanza reiterates the importance of the issue of identity in female poetry, when Sexton's speaker claims that she is 'approximately an I' (6), as opposed to Bishop's girl reminding herself that she was, in fact, an "I". The speaker's identification with an artificial woman, a synthetic doll with plastic eyes and nylon legs, metaphorically and ironically portrays women as lacking a sense of self and of autonomous agency toward their bodies. This impersonation trope is frequently employed by Sexton: in 'Housewife' (1962), for instance, the female speaker identifies with a house. As Nelson (2002, 96) points out, the speaker's transformation into a house serves the purpose of comparing the intrusion into the house to the violation of the human body:

Some women marry houses.
It's another kind of skin; it has a heart,
a mouth, a liver and bowel movements.
The walls are permanent and pink.
See how she sits on her knees all day,
faithfully washing herself down.
Men enter by force, drawn back like Jonah
into their fleshy mothers.
A woman is her mother.
That's the main thing. (Sexton 1988, 64)

The poem revolves around the literal interpretation of the term 'housewife', by defining her character alternatively as the wife of the house, and as the wife becoming a house. At first, the woman is depicted as separate from the house, which is designated as 'it' and as having 'another kind of skin', 'a heart', 'a mouth, a liver and bowel movements' on its own (2-3). The mention of the walls—of the house, but also metaphorically the wall of the woman's skin—acts like a caesura between house and persona, as the subject is now qualified as a 'she' (5). By associating the house to the female body, the boundaries between the house and the woman start to disappear. When Sexton collocates the imperative 'see' (5) at the beginning of the verse, she is precisely accentuating the male gaze and emphasizing the role of the addressee in looking at the scene; the poet thus encourages the reader to stop identifying the woman as the subject and repositions her as an object of observation. Being excluded from agency, she is subjected to invasion by 'men' (7) and to the dispossession of her own body, her own house.

In 'Consorting with Angels', Sexton focuses instead on the mouth and breasts as symbols for the female corporeal experience: 'I was tired of being a woman,/tired of the spoons and the pots,/tired of my mouth and my breasts,/tired of the cosmetics and the silks.' (1-4; Sexton 1988, 83). While Sexton selects different parts of the body to define being a woman, her speaker claims to be tired of it, because of the responsibilities and demanding requirements that come with possessing a female body. Similarly to what occurred in Bishop's poem, the breasts provide an immediate association with being female, and, again as in Bishop, the mouth becomes a metonym for female vocal agency and creative expression. In further poems, Sexton employs a distinctively female voice, often as a result of performing and exaggerating her gendered expression. She does this mainly by contaminating her poetry with uncomfortable intimate female experiences, which are not commonly found in poetic writing, thus highlighting her affinity with the confessional mode: biological issues are tackled in 'Menstruation at Forty', where the speaker's aspiration for pregnancy is thwarted ('All this without you—/two days gone in blood', 30-31; Sexton 1988, 96), which echoes 'The Abortion', where the speaker longs for 'this baby that I bleed' (27; Sexton 1988, 56), and in 'In Celebration of My Uterus', a celebratory song of fertility and being female (Sexton 1988, 125).

As Diane Middlebrook (1991) maintains, the identification of Sexton's poetry as both female and confessional is supported by her aspiration to straightforwardly expose the body of her female speakers, a custom that intrigued critics.¹⁰ Sexton, not unlike other poets, is especially keen on setting the exposure of the female body within the metaphorical space of a medical context, as Nelson (2013, 42) points out.

In this sense, the manipulation and exposure of the physical body metonymically relate to one's self-disclosure during psychoanalytic sessions or through poetry. The poem thus becomes analogous to a breach in one's private self, and the speaker, as a patient, cedes control to the doctor, as well as to the reader. 'The Operation' (1962) portrays a woman that discovers an illness during a visit to the gynecologist, who decides to operate on her. In the first stanza, the protagonist is preparing to endure the doctor's invasion, as her body is tamed by the stirrups, at the mercy of the doctor's "violation":

After the sweet promise,
the summer's mild retreat
from mother's cancer, the winter months of her death,
I come to this white office, its sterile sheet,
its hard tablet, its stirrups, to hold my breath
while I, who must, allow the glove its oily rape,
to hear the almost mighty doctor over me equate
my ills with hers
and decide to operate. (1-9; Sexton 1988, 52)

The 'oily rape', the violation of the female body, is required in order to be diagnosed and cured, so the speaker 'must allow' the male invasion of her body. Sexton's grammatical choices reflect the inevitability of the female invasion by men, which women seem paradoxically to be 'forced to grant', as Nelson observes (2002, 125).

The idea of violating the female body is addressed by Adrienne Rich (1929-2012) in 'Rape' (1972), which denounces the powerlessness and criminalization of rape victims. In the poem, the speaker is a rape victim who is recounting her experience to a policeman. Throughout the poem, the protagonist is aware of the fact that the police officer would end up not believing her, and she would be treated as a liar and a criminal herself:

And so, when the time comes, you have to turn to him,
the maniac's sperm still greasing your thighs,
your mind whirling like crazy. You have to confess
to him, you are guilty of the crime
of having been forced. (11-15; Rich 1994, 44)

Rich chooses to portray the characters as opposite poles of the power spectrum: the officer is described as dressed in a uniform ('in his boots and silver badge,/on horseback, one hand touching his gun', 4-5; 'he and his stallion clop like warlords among the trash', 8), as powerful ('he has access to machinery that could kill you', 7), looking down from above, whereas the woman is weak, naked and vulnerable under the tyrannical and paternalistic gaze of the cop ('he knows, or thinks he knows, what you secretly wanted', 25). The officer's eyes 'glisten' (17), revealing his morbid curiosity towards the details of the crime that she suffered, while 'he wants them all/but the hysteria in your voice pleases him best' (19-20). In addition, the poignant analogy between the rapist and the officer—symbolized with the phonetic affinity between 'maniac' and 'machinery' and with the equation between 'sperm' and 'greasing'—testifies for their belonging to the same patriarchal machine of violence.

The invasive male gaze is also at the center of one of Sylvia Plath's (1932-1963) earliest poems, 'Bluebeard', written before 1956. This text is framed upon the traditional fairytale, in which Bluebeard's young and curious wife has been forbidden to open a room in the castle; when she surrenders to her curiosity and manages to unlock the door, she finds that the room is actually used to hide the bloody corpses of her husband's previous wives. Although not a confessional poem in the traditional sense, since it draws on a fictive story, the text employs the confessional first person to align the speaker with the character's perspective:

I am sending back the key
that let me into bluebeard's study;
because he would make love to me
I am sending back the key;
in his eye's darkroom I can see
my X-rayed heart, dissected body;
I am sending back the key
that let me into bluebeard's study. (Plath 1981, 305)

Rather than on the murderous discovery that constitutes the plot twist in the original fairytale, Plath chooses to focus on the man's gaze, representing it by associating Bluebeard's eyes to a sort of voyeuristic photographic chamber in which he observes and dissects the young female body ('in his eye's darkroom I can see/my X-rayed heart, dissected body', 5-6).

Images of both naked and clothed female bodies abound in Plath's texts. She is especially keen on exploring the liminal edge that separates appearance from reality,

the public, external self from the private, internal one, the veiled skin from the inside. In Plath, concepts of unveiling and unpeeling relate to a supposed split between two selves in the poetic persona: the subject in her poems frequently sheds her skin in order to disclose a truer or newer self. This condition is the main topic of 'In Plaster' and 'Face Lift'. Both were written in 1961, and both are set in a hospital-like environment, where the speaker is a woman whose relationship with her doppelgänger takes place within her own skin. In 'Face Lift' (Plath 1981, 155), in particular, the conflict resolves in a sort of disassociation from the physical body ('Darkness wipes me out like chalk on a blackboard', 15) and especially from the skin ('Skin doesn't have roots, it peels away easy as paper', 20), which is shed, recalling a snake-like peeling, in order to be reborn again, 'mother to myself, I wake swaddled in gauze/pink and smooth as a baby' (31-32). Therefore, in Plath two selves are struggling in an unsolvable either/or relationship, a contrast which takes place in the skin of the speaking subject. Kathleen Lant (1993, 636) links this duality to an overwhelming sense of vulnerability in being intrinsically female, which is conveyed through the idea of physical nakedness.

A similar struggle between two facets of one's self is at the center of Louise Glück's (1943) take on the theme of anorexia. In her essay *Education of the Poet* (1989) recalling her own experience, she argues that the intent of anorexia 'is not self-destructive', rather it is 'to construct, in the only way possible when means are so limited, a plausible self' (Glück 1995, 11), an idealized self which is perceived as perfect. The fourth section in 'Dedication to Hunger' ('The Deviation') precisely exposes the anxiety that a young female can feel about her own naked body and sexuality, while it is on the verge of transitioning to adolescence and adulthood:

It begins quietly
in certain female children:
the fear of death, taking as its form
dedication to hunger,
because a woman's body
is a grave; it will accept
anything. I remember
lying in bed at night
touching the soft, digressive breasts,
touching, at fifteen,
the interfering flesh
that I would sacrifice

until the limbs were free
of blossom and subterfuge: I felt
what I feel now, aligning these words—
it is the same need to perfect,
of which death is the mere by-product. (48-64; Glück 1980, 32)

The dismissal of the body, through its sacrifice and self-erasure, epitomizes the anorectic experience: here, the 'deviation' may refer to the divergence and separation of the self from the bodily experience, for which the subject is determined to deprive herself of her physical form in order to reach her ideal self, to satisfy the 'need to perfect,/of which death is the mere by-product' (63-64).

On the contrary, in Sylvia Plath's later poems, the exposure of the body acquires an assertive quality. In 'Purdah' and 'Lady Lazarus' (both 1962), the concept of undressing and exposing the speaker's body acts as a powerful self-redefining instrument. In 'Purdah', the subject's body is initially concealed beneath a veil ('I breathe, and the mouth/Veil stirs its curtain', 24-25), hiding from the gaze of her partner ('My visibilities hide./I gleam like a mirror./At this facet the bridegroom arrives/Lord of the mirrors!', 17-20). Drawing towards the end of the poem, the speaker progressively unleashes her power against the male counterpart, at the same time as she enacts her undressing:

Attendants of the eyelash!
I shall unloose
One feather, like the peacock.
Attendants of the lip!
I shall unloose
One note [...]
Attendants!
And at his next step
I shall unloose
I shall unloose—
From the small jeweled
Doll he guards like a heart— (37-42, 49-54; Plath 1981, 243)

The melodramatic climax allows for the discarding of the 'doll' character that she had impersonated, leading her to take possession of her own naked and violent force. In 'Lady Lazarus', written in the same days as 'Purdah', the exposure of the self finally

finds a resolution. Here, Plath theatricalizes the striptease of her Lazarus persona in order to unveil her resurrecting body, while toying with the audience's voyeuristic gaze: the protagonist's erotic striptease mocks the commodification of female bodies for the enjoyment of (mostly) male consumers:

The peanut-crunching crowd
Shoves in to see
Them unwrap me hand and foot—
The big strip tease.
Gentlemen, ladies
These are my hands
My knees.
I may be skin and bone,
Nevertheless, I am the same, identical woman.
(26-34, Plath 1981, 245)

The speaker's ever-renewing self, who is capable of dying ('to annihilate each decade', 24) and being reborn 'one year in every ten' (2), is exposed layer by layer as she strips out of bandages, much like the speaker in 'Face Lift'. She then offers her body bit by bit to her audience, the 'peanut-crunching crowd', which is eager to attend the 'walking miracle' (4) of her performative resurrection, as well as to obtain relics from her body.

There is a charge
For the eyeing of my scars, there is a charge
For the hearing of my heart—
It really goes.
And there is a charge, a very large charge
For a word or a touch
Or a bit of blood
Or a piece of my hair or my clothes. (57-64, Plath 1981, 246)

While 'Lady Lazarus'—much like Plath's most anthologized poem, 'Daddy'—has been extensively read as an allegorical autobiographical account of Plath's own failed suicide attempts, it is worth noting that the icon of the female body here becomes the perfect site for a different kind of life narrative, one that instead focuses on death: autothanatography¹¹. As paradoxical as it may appear, considering 'Lady Lazarus' as

an autothanatographical narrative provides a valid interpretation to the speaker as offering an account of her own death and subsequent rebirth. Despite the ontological impossibility of carrying out an account of one's own death—which is the single event to lie beyond the scope of an autobiographical narrative—the concept of autothanatography precisely records the crossing of the moment of death and the survival of the conscience to physical death, which justifies a writing from the beyond, a 'writing *from* rather than merely *of* death' (Callus 2005, 427). In the context of life writing, the term is profoundly contradictory, 'since death cannot be known to the self, far less written about' (Bainbrigge 2005, 359). Nonetheless, the idea of autothanatography is not merely the testimony of the autobiographical narrator's death: rather, it is the illogical recording of the crossing of the moment of death and its internalization. In being intrinsically borderline, autothanatography is one of 'the most extreme of boundary-bending and demarcation-transgressing texts' (Callus 2005, 429), and therefore another intriguing piece of the life writing and self-disclosure puzzle.

Although critics like Lant do not fully believe in the self-assertive force that emerges from these texts, what is interesting here is that Lady Lazarus's undressing and offering of cheap relics of her body stands in addition as a criticism of confessional poetry itself, as a medium that claims to reveal the true self. Ironically, Plath mocks the morbid curiosity of the audience—that same curiosity that would later affect her posthumous reception and that would presume a seamless fit between her biographical story and her poetic personae.¹² Her criticism precisely addresses both the gender and the genre biases that were mentioned at the beginning of this essay: in 'Lady Lazarus', the female object of desire is actually a degraded body, her relics are nothing but cheap souvenirs of a corpse. She is thus subverting the patriarchal commodification of the female body by offering a macabre spectacle of 'flesh, bones' (75), 'eye pits' (13), and 'sour breath' (14). At the same time, she is subverting the perceived seriousness of confessional self-disclosure, by highlighting its clichés, its performative nature, and finally by degrading it to a cheap striptease.

Female modern poets, and Plath especially, were not only able to inscribe a female perspective into their art, to 'write through the body', often anticipating what Cixous would advocate for in 1976. They also managed to exploit that same body to discard the trope of female vulnerability, as well as to overthrow the cliché of poetry as the expression of the authentic. 'Edge' (1963), Plath's last poem, is the final testimony to these subversions. The text portrays a dead woman that has presumably committed both infanticide and suicide; the scene represented in the poem pivots on the image of her 'beautiful' corpse: 'The woman is perfected/Her dead/Body wears the smile of

accomplishment/The illusion of a Greek necessity' (1-4; Plath 1981, 272). Here, Plath toys with the male gaze by ironically de-sexualizing the corpse: she denies the protagonist's breast their biological function of feeding the babies, who are 'coiled [...] at each little/pitcher of milk, now empty' (9-11). Moreover, the poem oscillates between images of sensuous eroticism and maternity—her children are 'folded/[...] back into her body as petals' (12-13) and her body is compared to 'a rose close when the garden/stiffens and odors bleed/from the sweet, deep throats of the night flower' (14-16)—and, on the other hand, the pervasive image of the statue-like corpse, static and pristine. Ironically, Plath is indicating that only in death can women achieve perfection, 'the smile of accomplishment' (3), the 'perfected' self she aspired to reach.

In this brief journey from a young girl's first acquaintance with her body, to the adult woman's taunting of voyeurism, we have shown how Bishop, Sexton, Rich, Glück, and Plath exposed and represented the female bodies through violence, eroticism, and irony, by presenting femininity as both essence and performance: not only as a means for poetic self-revelation but also, and more importantly, as a problematic and potentially endless negotiation of the self, challenging their readers to redefine the terms by which we understand poetry, life writing, and the female.

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Notes

¹ Unfortunately, this stereotype still proves resilient. A 2016 analysis of thematic biases in *The New York Times* book reviews, from 2000 to 2015, showed that even when gender inequality in publishing and reviewing seems to gradually recede, the representation of women writers still aligns to the stereotype that assumes that women tend to write about domestic issues, family, and themselves, whereas men write about more universal issues, ideas, and politics: ‘Women writers are still being defined by their “sentimental” traits and a love of writing about “maternal” issues, while men are most often being defined by their attention to matters of science and the state’ (Piper & So 2016). Drawing attention to the numerical imbalance in the representation of women in book reviews has unfortunately done very little to change the ways in which women writers are still being portrayed in the press.

² Cixous’s essay originally appeared as *Le Rire de la Méduse* in the 1975 special issue of the journal *L’Arc*, which was devoted to Simone de Beauvoir and the feminist movement. It was then revised by Cixous and translated the following year by Keith and Paula Cohen, to appear in *Signs. The Laugh of the Medusa* was not the only essay in which Cixous addressed the complex relationship between femininity and writing; rather, it should be considered as part of a series of essays, along with *La Jeune née* (written with Catherine Clément in 1975), *Le Sexe ou la tête?* (1976, translated as *Castration or decapitation?*, 1981), and *La Venue à l’écriture* (1977).

³ According to the Greek myth, Medusa was one of the three Gorgons. These human-like monsters, shaped like women, were characterized by a head full of venomous snakes instead of hair, as well as by the frightening power of turning to stone anyone who accidentally gazed into their eyes. Although there is some speculation about the Gorgon’s true origin, narrators and commentators agree on her death: she was beheaded by the hero Perseus. He managed to slay her by not looking directly into her eyes; instead, he looked at her reflection in the mirrored shield that Athena gave him. Cixous interprets the myth of Medusa and her beheading as allegorical to men’s attempt to silence and castrate the voice, the language, and the sexuality of women, thereby reversing Freud’s castration complex.

⁴ The main issue in Cixous’s propositions is that the female body appears ‘as a direct source of female writing’ (Jones 1981, 252). Since Cixous seems to believe in a sort of deterministic pre-existence of the body over the act of writing, Wenzel (1981, 266) accuses her of ‘apotheosiz[ing] some innate [female] essence’, and similarly Jones (1981, 247-248) highlights that Cixous’s attention to an innate femininity posits ‘that female subjectivity is derived from women’s physiology and bodily instincts as they affect sexual experience and the unconscious’.

⁵ This bias is especially pervasive in life writing practices. For example, Hermione Lee argues that female biographies are often considered in terms of gender difference, for which ‘biographies of men are dominated by external events,’ whereas ‘most biographies of women are a blend of external and

internal'. Also, she observes that although 'most women are still judged by their private lives [...] if the subject is a writer, access to the privacy of the author seems more intensely desired when the author is a woman' (Lee 2009, 127-128).

⁶ The label first appeared in M.L. Rosenthal's review of Robert Lowell's *Life Studies* (1959), which was published in *The Nation* and was titled 'Poetry as Confession' (now in Rosenthal 1991). In the review, Rosenthal classified Lowell, along with Plath, Sexton, Berryman and Snodgrass, as the confessional poets.

⁷ Despite knowing one another mainly through Lowell's classes, the poets that were labelled 'confessional' did not consider themselves collectively as a poetic movement: all of them individually explored poetic practices drawing upon both private experiences and public, social reality. In addition, the label of 'confessional poetry' was generally met with disapproval, if not rejection. For instance, Elizabeth Bishop dismissed the term as 'that nonsense of confessional poetry' (Schiller 1996, 76); Sexton commented that she 'hated being called confessional and denied it' (Sexton & Ames 1977, 373); in addition, Berryman reacted to the term 'with rage and contempt!' in the *Paris Review* (Stitt & Berryman 1972), and in the same review, Snodgrass claimed that he 'never cared for the term confessional in the least [...] I think it's a journalistic tag, not very accurate. It sounds either like you're some kind of religious poet, which I am not, or as if you write bedroom memoirs, and I hope I don't come under that heading' (Eyle & Snodgrass 1994).

⁸ For instance, Paul de Man asks whether 'autobiography [could] be written in verse' (1979, 920), and James Olney argues that 'poetry, like psychology and philosophy, is about life, not about part of it but potentially about all of it' (Olney 1972, 260-61). Moreover, focusing on the relationship between autobiography and women's poetry, Schenck speculates that 'the autobiographical genre may be paradigmatic of all women's writing' (Schenck 1988, 286). See Sontag and Graham (2001) for a rare attempt at discussing the complex relationship between poetry and autobiography, albeit with regards only to the American context.

⁹ For instance, in her analysis of confessional poetry Deborah Nelson focuses on contextual factors, particularly on the issue of privacy as it informs American culture during the Cold War era. According to Nelson, confessional poetry takes place in a context of heightened popular interest in the concepts of privacy, personal and private, due to a general climate of surveillance incited by McCarthyism. (Nelson 2013, 35; see also Nelson 2002 for a more comprehensive study).

¹⁰ Middlebrook argues that 'by 1962 Sexton had begun to experience the interesting social role of contemporary American woman poet as an identity with a life of its own, being shaped for her by the reception of her work[...] it was her direct treatment of the female body in such poems as "The Operation" that attracted the interest of reviewers' (Middlebrook 1991, 172).

¹¹ The term 'autothanatography' was coined by Jacques Derrida in a comment to Maurice Blanchot's *L'instant de ma mort* (1994).

¹² Plath was not the only writer who suffered a biased reception. As Hermione Lee observes with regards to biographies of female authors, 'women writers whose lives involved abuse, mental illness, self-harm, suicide, have often been treated, biographically, as victims or psychological case-histories first and as professional writers second. The agendas that surround such stories are acutely on view in biographies of Woolf or Plath' (Lee 2009, 128-129). Such agendas often turned into pathographic interpretations, by which critics considered the works of art to mirror the writers' pathologies and troubled biography, thus distorting and misdirecting readers' interpretations. For a discussion of Plath's pathographic readings, see Clark (2019).