

A Brief Guide to Confessional Poetry

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Type

Schools & Movements

Confessional poetry is the poetry of the personal or “I.” This style of writing emerged in the late 1950s and early 1960s and is associated with poets such as Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, and W. D. Snodgrass. Lowell’s book *Life Studies* was a highly personal account of his life and familial ties and had a significant impact on American poetry. Plath and Sexton were both students of Lowell and noted that his work influenced their own writing.

The confessional poetry of the mid-twentieth century dealt with subject matter that previously had not been openly discussed in American poetry. Private experiences with and feelings about death, trauma, depression and relationships were addressed in this type of poetry, often in an autobiographical manner. Sexton in particular was interested in the psychological aspect of poetry, having started writing at the suggestion of her therapist.

The confessional poets were not merely recording their emotions on paper; craft and construction were extremely important to their work. While their treatment of the poetic self may have been groundbreaking and shocking to some readers, these poets maintained a high level of craftsmanship through their careful attention to and use of prosody.

One of the most well-known poems by a confessional poet is "Daddy" by Plath. Addressed to her father, the poem contains references to the Holocaust but uses a sing-song rhythm that echoes the nursery rhymes of childhood:

*Daddy, I have had to kill you.
You died before I had time--
Marble-heavy, a bag full of God,*

*Ghastly statue with one gray toe
Big as a Frisco seal*

Another confessional poet of this generation was John Berryman. His major work was *The Dream Songs*, which consists of 385 poems about a character named Henry and his friend Mr. Bones. Many of the poems contain elements of Berryman's own life and traumas, such as his father's suicide. Below is an excerpt from "Dream Song 1":

*All the world like a woolen lover
once did seem on Henry's side.
Then came a departure.
Thereafter nothing fell out as it might or ought.
I don't see how Henry, pried
open for all the world to see, survived.*

The confessional poets of the 1950s and 1960s pioneered a type of writing that forever changed the landscape of American poetry. The tradition of confessional poetry has been a major influence on generations of writers and continues to this day; Marie Howe and Sharon Olds are two contemporary poets whose writing largely draws upon their personal experience.

Confessional poetry

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

Confessional poetry or 'Confessionalism' is a style of poetry that emerged in the United States during the 1950s. It has been described as poetry "of the personal," focusing on extreme moments of individual experience, the psyche, and personal trauma, including previously taboo matter such as mental illness, sexuality, and suicide, often set in relation to broader social themes.^[1] It is sometimes also classified as Postmodernism.^[2]

The school of "Confessional Poetry" was associated with several poets who redefined American poetry in the 1950s and 1960s, including Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath, John Berryman, Anne Sexton, Allen Ginsberg, and W. D. Snodgrass.

Life Studies and the emergence of Confessionalism

In 1959 M. L. Rosenthal first used the term "confessional" in a review of Robert Lowell's *Life Studies* entitled "Poetry as Confession",^[5] Rosenthal differentiated the confessional approach from other modes of lyric poetry by way of its use of confidences that (Rosenthal said) went "beyond customary bounds of reticence or personal embarrassment".^[6] Rosenthal notes that in earlier tendencies towards the confessional there was typically a "mask" that hid the poet's "actual face", and states that "Lowell removes the mask. His speaker is unequivocally himself, and it is hard not to think of *Life Studies* as a series of personal confidences, rather shameful, that one is honor-bound not to reveal".^[7] In a review of the book in *The Kenyon Review*, John Thompson wrote, "For these poems, the question of propriety no longer exists. They have made a conquest: what they have won is a major expansion of the territory of poetry."^[8]

There were however clear moves towards the "confessional" mode before the publication of *Life Studies*. Delmore Schwartz's confessional long poem *Genesis* had been published in 1943; and John Berryman had written a sonnet sequence in 1947 about an adulterous affair he'd had with a woman named Chris while he was married to his first wife, Eileen (however, since publishing the sonnets would have revealed the affair to his wife, Berryman didn't actually publish the sequence, titled *Berryman's Sonnets*, until 1967, after he divorced from his first wife).^{[9][10]} Snodgrass' *Heart's Needle*, in which he writes about the aftermath of his divorce, also preceded *Life Studies*.

Life Studies was nonetheless the first book in the confessional mode that captured the reading public's attention and the first to officially be labeled "confessional." Most notably "confessional" were the poems in the final section of *Life Studies* in which Lowell alludes to his struggles with mental illness and his experiences in a mental hospital. Plath remarked upon the influence of these types of poems from *Life Studies* in an interview in which she stated, "I've been very excited by what I feel is the new breakthrough that came with, say, Robert Lowell's *Life Studies*, this intense breakthrough into very serious, very personal, emotional experience which I feel has been partly taboo. Robert Lowell's poems about his experience in a mental

hospital, for example, interested me very much."^[11] A. Alvarez however considered that some poems in *Life Studies* seemed "more compulsively concerned with the processes of psychoanalysis than with those of poetry";^[12] while conversely Michael Hofmann saw the verbal merit of Lowell's work only diminished by emphasis on "what I would call the C-word, 'Confessionalism'".^[13]

Further developments

Other key texts of the American "confessional" school of poetry include Plath's *Ariel*, Berryman's *The Dream Songs*, and Sexton's *To Bedlam and Part Way Back*, though Berryman himself rejected the label "with rage and contempt":^[14]

The word doesn't mean anything. I understand the confessional to be a place where you go and talk with a priest. I personally haven't been to confession since I was twelve years old.^[15]

Another significant, if transitional figure was Adrienne Rich;^[16] while one of the most prominent, consciously "confessional" poets to emerge in the 1980s was Sharon Olds whose focus on taboo sexual subject matter built off of the work of Ginsberg.

Reaction

In the 1970s and 1980s, some writers rebelled against Confessionalism in American poetry, arguing that it was too self-indulgent. For instance, one of the foremost poets of the Deep Image school, Robert Bly, was highly critical of what he perceived to be the solipsistic tendencies of Confessional poets. He referenced this aesthetic distaste when he praised the poet Antonio Machado for "his emphasis on the suffering of others rather than his own".^[17] However, many others writers during this period, like Sharon Olds, Marie Howe, and Franz Wright, were strongly influenced by the precedent set by Confessional poetry with its themes of taboo autobiographical experience, of the psyche and the self, and revelations of childhood and adult traumas.

The poetic movement of New Formalism, a return to rhyme and meter, would also spring from a backlash against free verse that had become popular in Confessional poetry. Another poetry movement that formed, in part, as a reaction to confessional poetry included the Language poets.

~EDWARD BYRNE~

EXAMINING THE POETRY OF CONFESSION AND AUTOBIOGRAPHY: AFTER CONFESSION: POETRY AS AUTOBIOGRAPHY

A century after Whitman's inclusive ego attempted to incorporate everyone and everything around him and seemingly spoke for all the shared elements in his beloved democracy, the confessional poets appeared determined to tell those intimate tales that distinguished themselves as separate, private, and insistently unique individuals.

Now as the twenty-first century begins, the ambiguous legacy of confessional poetry persists in its influence over many American poets and it inspires ambivalent responses from critics, readers, and sometimes the poets themselves.

Ever since Walt Whitman, our great father of American poetry, wrote the opening line for "Song of Myself" ÷ "I celebrate myself, and sing myself" ÷ a spotlight has shone on the American poet's ego, and the expression of his or her individual self, as a primary source for information, as well as inspiration. Indeed, this focus on the self has often been consciously proposed and promoted by the poets themselves. However, even when American poets have not purposely placed themselves in the forefront of their poems, many readers have repeatedly sought to identify the personae and performances reported in the poetry with the biographical details belonging to the lives of the poets behind the lines.

Almost exactly one hundred years after the 1855 publication of the first edition of Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, the chronicling of personal autobiographical matters ÷ what M.L. Rosenthal disdainfully referred to as "personal confidences, rather shameful" ÷ by American poets reached a peak with the publication of two of the twentieth century's most influential volumes of poetry, Allen Ginsberg's *Howl* (1956) and Robert Lowell's *Life Studies* (1959), soon to be followed by similarly revealing collections of poetry by W.D. Snodgrass, Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath, John Berryman, and others.

In his essay establishing the term "confessional" for this new movement of mid-twentieth century poets, Rosenthal recognized a further willingness by American poets to open their own personal faults and frailties, their most private histories and intimate experiences, for close examination by the readers of their poetry. In fact, poets' records of marital infidelities, painful

personal failures, mental health breakdowns, and incidents of psychological anguish were displayed on the pages for the scrutiny of readers as easily as innocent family photographs might be shared with friends following travels on a vacation trip.

Consequently, confessional poetry was defined by its content ÷ the intimate, sometimes sordid, autobiography of the poet revealed in explicit first-person narration ÷ rather than any novel technical development or formal advancement. A century after Whitman's inclusive ego attempted to incorporate everyone and everything around him and seemingly spoke for all the shared elements in his beloved democracy, the confessional poets appeared determined to tell those intimate tales that distinguished themselves as separate, private, and insistently unique individuals. Now as the twenty-first century begins, the ambiguous legacy of confessional poetry persists in its influence over many American poets and it inspires ambivalent responses from critics, readers, and sometimes the poets themselves. As David Graham and Kate Sontag declare in the introduction to their impressive recent anthology of essays on the art and ethics of contemporary autobiographical poetry, *After Confession: Poetry as Autobiography*, "more than forty years after the poets and the poetry first tagged 'confessional' ignited critical controversy, American poetry continues to display a notable confessional strain ÷ some would say exhaustively and exhaustedly so."



Indeed, as Graham and Sontag point out, the characteristics of confessional poetry can now be detected, and their merits debated, in all aspects of American writing: "For good or ill, we live in the age of the memoir. As autobiographies, memoirs, fictionalized biographies, and works of creative nonfiction fill bookstores with ever-growing frequency, discussion of the nature and boundaries of autobiographical writing has grown both common and heated." In an effort to organize some of the various views on an apparently ongoing prominence of confessional or autobiographical presentations as tactics in today's American poetry, Graham and Sontag have gathered together commentaries by thirty contemporary poets on "the often controversial historical, ethical, and critical considerations related to autobiographical poetry."

In the fascinating contributions to their anthology, Graham and Sontag recognize a lingering concern by poets and critics over the effect of the lyric "I" in contemporary poetry, especially as it sometimes presents a conflict between egotistical self-absorption or embarrassingly intimate self-referencing by the author and the use of a first-person narration to widen the scope of the poem, as a tool to increase a reader's emotional identification with the writer as actor in the work or to initiate a reader's vicarious sharing of the experiences and activities related in the poem. Rather than see autobiographical poetry as confining for the writer and limiting for the reader, some poets appreciate the possibility for a more universal effect similar to that sought by Whitman. Graham and Sontag define this as "the notion that first-person lyrics can embrace a larger social vision, achieving revelation over narcissism, universal resonance over self-referential anecdote."

Brendan Galvin categorizes the division between the confessional poetry of the past and the autobiographical poetry of the present in his unique essay "The Contemporary Poet and the Natural World":

In the work of Lowell and other confessional poets, the twentieth-century persona (exemplified by Eliot's Prufrock, for instance) is replaced by a speaker who more closely represents the author, and

the poem's circumstances can usually be verified as more or less the author's own. Lately, however, the confession is often contextless, with little of the who, what, when, where, and why that might give the reader some sense of character, setting, or incident ÷ a few clues to keep him interested.

A number of the poets in this anthology seek middle ground by acknowledging that it is frequently difficult to distinguish the self from the speaker in one's poems, and there may be good reason not to do so. William Matthews observes "the 'personal' and the 'impersonal' are intricately braided, and thus both difficult and perhaps not even useful to separate, in the way a craft ÷ let's say the craft of poetry ÷ is practiced. But you'd hardly know this from reading and listening to discussions of poetry." Carol Frost complements Matthews' stance with her own comment that "all poetry is autobiographical in its revelations of the motions a mind makes. The hesitancies, detours, innuendoes, spirals of lies and truths, as a person remembers or invents, are as essentially personal as the facts of that person's life."

In an especially strong essay "in defense of the lyric," and one that also indirectly offers support to Matthews' viewpoint, Joan Aleshire reviews the past of the lyric "I" in poetry, and she describes how "the lyric song emerged as a short improvisation based on the singer's life at the moment of writing." However, any writing of poetry arises from a poet's lifetime of accumulated experiences and observations. Therefore, Aleshire states: "The 'I' is an agent of experience which, if not immediately intelligible to us in its particulars, becomes so as the argument is presented through sound, syntax, and imagery." Similarly, Stanley Plumly proposes that the act of writing about a particular moment of inspiration or illumination, as in a lyric poem, is one in which the author discovers "the soul of that moment is the common life we call autobiography, since our identities depend so much on that with which we identify and that which identifies with us."

Another commentary that looks back at the origins of autobiographical poetry is "My Grandfather's Tackle Box," by Billy Collins. Here, he reports:

Up until the end of the eighteenth century, poetic decorum would remind the author that he must keep himself subordinate to his subject matter, which would be determined by his choice of genre. High matter for the epic, verbal coyness or plangent sincerity for the love lyric. For a poet to write of his own life ÷ his discovery of daffodils in a field or his grandfather's tackle box in the attic ÷ would be not only self-indulgent but of no value to an audience interested in its own edification, not in the secrets of the poet's past.

Of course, all this changed with the publication of *Lyrical Ballads* by William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge who, along with other "English Romantics were encouraged to base poems on personal experience by John Locke's notion that each individual's consciousness is uniquely formed."

Yusef Komunyakaa, in a very fine essay titled "The Autobiographical 'I': An Archive of Metaphor, Imagery, and Innuendo," sorts out the differing use of the first person in Wordsworth's poetry and Whitman's poetry. In their practice of presenting themselves in their poems through

the personal pronoun "I," Komunyakaa discerns a clear distinction, one that reflects the concerns mentioned earlier, particularly the conflict between egotistical self-absorption and the use of a first-person narration to widen the scope of the poem. Komunyakaa determines that Wordsworth's "I" is "more self-centered and egotistical, Whitman reaches for a crescendo driven by sheer force of will like a birth-cry and death-cry woven into one impulse. Whitman's 'I am,' a self that embodies imagination, travels beyond the personal." Again, echoing the essays by Matthews and Aleshire, Komunyakaa confides that for him the speaker in Whitman's poems is effective because he "is often a universal 'I' whose feelings have been shaped by experience and/or imagination, an empathetic witness."

Reading this essay, the reader is treated to a wonderful account of how Whitman's poetry influenced the younger Yusef Komunyakaa from the time he first opened a copy of *Leaves of Grass* at the local library:

. . . Whitman would help me discover the undivulged mysteries of my surroundings—his terrifying, lyrical vibrancy that exacted an elusive beauty in life. He told me that my own rough song could also embrace a believable, shaped lyricism made of imagination and experience. As a matter of fact, imagination, not only what's observed, also counts as experience. And, since the artist, the poet, isn't just a reporter of the so-called facts, Whitman, seems like an act of conjuring. He reinvents himself on the page, singing his imagined self into existence, into immortality through a lyrical urgency.

The "lyrical urgency" Komunyakaa finds in Whitman's poetry represents one of the elements that characterize much of the last few decades of contemporary poetry. Following the confessional poets, and their emphasis on intimate narratives, many postconfessional poets have borrowed an interest in exploring personal autobiographical experiences as sources for their poems, but with an enhanced primary focus, as in Whitman's work, on lyrical poetry's ability to transcend the individual's personal condition and appeal more widely to readers through realization of a universal understanding or shared emotional response to the autobiographical experiences examined in their poetry. Postconfessional poetry endeavors to achieve the "lyrical vibrancy that exacted an elusive beauty in life," the amazing quality, combining "imagination and experience" that Komunyakaa found so moving in Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*. In doing so, many contemporary poets have managed to write poems of personal experience while at the same time avoiding the criticism confessional poets like Lowell, Plath, and Sexton received for their most unrelentingly intimate works resembling scenes from a private documentary, even from sympathetic readers like Elizabeth Bishop, who confided to her friend Robert Lowell that she deplored some of the confessional elements in his poetry, especially what she perceived as Lowell's unethical use of confidential material from personal letters and conversations with family and friends.

Some poets and critics have issued an objection to the contemporary autobiographical poem on other ethical grounds. Since any recounting of personal episodes or autobiographical experiences will naturally include fact and fiction, objective observations and subjective analysis, straight narration and rhetorical embellishments, a number of writers have voiced concern about the ethics of presenting as truth, or a literature that carries the appearance of truth,

what might be at best partial truth, and at worst a complete fabrication. In *After Confession: Poetry as Autobiography*, Ted Kooser courageously addresses this ethical dilemma in an essay that indicates by its very title an intention to question a possible trend toward falsifying the self as first-person narrator in contemporary American poetry: the essay is called "Lying for the Sake of Making Poems." Kooser expresses a certain amount of concern and suspicion about the effort by some poets to fictionalize themselves as the personae in poems that present an aura of truth, but which also manipulate the reader into believing in certain false events and experiences that were witnessed or endured by the poet/speaker in the poem:

Perhaps I am hopelessly old-fashioned. Perhaps I should accept the possibility that what the poet says happened really didn't happen at all, but I'm going to have to make a painful adjustment in the way I read poetry and honor poets. I grew up believing a lyric poet was a person who wrote down his or her observations, taken from life. I have always trusted the "I" of Walt Whitman as he dresses the wounds of fallen soldiers; I trust Mary Oliver to tell me what birds she saw as she walked through a marsh; I trust Stanley Kunitz when he describes two snakes entwined in a tree.

Kooser declares his ethical stance is one that seems betrayed by a poetic persona that pretends to be the poet narrating from autobiographical experience and acting as the self behaving in the poem, yet misleads the reader in any fashion. As Kooser declares: "When 'I' says something happened, I believe it happened, and if something awful has happened to 'I,' I feel for the poet." In this manner, Kooser seems to suggest that the personal lyric poem is also a contract between poet and reader, one that relies on the agreement of the reader to have faith in the credibility of the poet for the poem to be effective, and once that agreement is broken, so too is the poet's credibility in any future poems. Kooser does not deny the need sometimes to forge fictional experiences for the persona in a poem; however, he believes it the obligation of the poet to clarify for the reader that the identified persona is not to be mistaken for the poet. This may especially be true when solitary poems by any poet are published in a journal or anthology. Kooser selects the persona poems of Ai, which he feels could not be mistaken for the poet herself when published in a full-length collection because "no one writer could have had the wide variety of experience the poems present. But when her poems appear alone in magazines, the distinction may not be so clear." Consequently, Kooser feels it is the poet's duty to "in some way advise" the reader "that the experience presented may not be the poet's own."

Perhaps the most egregious ethical offense Kooser finds in poets is the willingness to fabricate experiences or events that engender sympathy, admiration, or even glory for the poet speaking as himself or herself in the lines of the poem. He believes the natural and understandable response by readers is to feel "cheated and deceived." Indeed, Kooser concludes that contemporary critics and readers ought to expect higher standards with regard to the truthfulness in personal autobiographical poems spoken through the persona of the poet: "It is despicable to exploit the trust a reader has in the truth of lyric poetry in order to gather undeserved sympathy to one's self. Why do we permit this kind of behavior in poetry when we would shrink from it in any other social situation?"

In an essay titled "Degrees of Fidelity," Stephen Dunn considers the ethical questions raised by Kooser, but is a bit less rigid in his response. Dunn quotes one of his own poems, "The

Routine Things Around the House," detailing the death of his mother and a memory of an incident that occurred when he was young. He was a curious twelve-year-old boy in 1951 who asked his mother if he could see her breasts: ". . . she took me into her room // without embarrassment or coyness / and I stared at them, / afraid to ask for more." Dunn reports in the essay:

I tell you that she did show me her breasts. Would I have written so if she hadn't? I don't think I would have. I think, though, there are details I made up. I've lived so long with the way I mythologized that event that I can't remember which ones are which. But I do remember feeling, after much revision, that all the details, fictive or actual, contributed to the poem's emotional veracity.

Thus, he seems to maintain an ethical balance. The most important details, especially those that might be sensational or embarrassing, for someone close to the poet should not be falsified. (Indeed, elsewhere in his essay, he asks: "Is a poem ever worth the discomfort or embarrassment of, say, the family member it alludes to or discusses?") Nevertheless, Dunn sees his responsibility as a poet, his obligation to the reader, in a slightly different light than Kooser. For Dunn "the poem's emotional veracity" takes precedence over a strict adherence to factual truth. Therefore, other details that are intentionally or accidentally fictional may be included in the poem. As the title of his essay suggests, there are degrees of fidelity for the poet, and the judgement one makes about this issue is just another part of the poet's task, one of the many choices in the creative process of writing a poem. It is not an easy task. As Dunn discovered: "The truth is that for many years the poem made me uncomfortable. To mishandle such subject matter was to descend into the vulgar."

This apprehension is held by other autobiographical poets who choose to be more cautious than the confessional poets of the past. In her essay, "Family Talk: The Confessional Poet? Not Me," Colette Inez writes: "I'm not confessing. I don't extol wretchedness. I'm not after absolution for, or remission of my sins as in the confessional booth of my childhood." She, too, tries to produce a poetry that is truthful without descending to a lower level: "we live in an age where little separates the exhibitionist, pornographer, or betrayer of secrets." Inez professes her goal of transforming autobiography into literature, but to do so "with compassionate detachment and discretion."

Andrew Hudgins is another poet who appears to reach a similar conclusion that the quality of the literature is foremost in any concerns about disclosure and ethical questions arising from the blending of fact and fiction. In his essay, "*The Glass Anvil: The Lies of an Autobiographer*," Hudgins confesses: "I am always astonished at how falsely I remember things, astonished at how plastic my memory is." However, like Dunn, Hudgins views his duty to the work as one which allows for some fictionalizing, and he seems to be willing to compromise fact and fiction for the sake of the literature:

Although the lies of interpretation and impressionism bother me, they are essential. We read memoirs precisely to find out what one writer thinks his life means and how that life felt to the one who lived it. As I look back over *The Glass Hammer*, I say, yes, that is what my childhood means, and, yes, that is how it felt.

And, to make those two affirmations, I accept, however uneasily,
the lies I had to tell.

A separate and significant section of the anthology is devoted to women poets and autobiography. One implication appears to be that a significant growth of influence by women poets has coincided with the period of confessional poetry, including poets such as Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton, and later decades, and that women's voices in poetry of autobiography represent a distinct and defining category in contemporary poetry. Pamela Gemin's insightful essay, "Bless Me, Sisters," exemplifies the vivid and vibrant body of confessional or autobiographical poetry that has been produced by women poets since the seventies as new generations moved forward with the lessons learned from those women confessional poets of an earlier era. Gemin reports how "poet Betsy Sholl vividly remembers the day, thirty-odd years ago, that she accidentally picked up a copy of Sylvia Plath's *Ariel*, took it home, drew a bath, eased into the tub, and began to read. 'I was afraid I'd be electrocuted,' said Sholl. 'There was all this current. I had never heard metaphors, similes, *language* buzzing like that.'"

In addition to overtly or subtly political poems that celebrate feminism or praise the lives of women and their work, contemporary women have written numerous poems filled with "themes of self-discovery and identity." In her essay, Gemin explores with admiration the variety of contemporary women poets who have written with excellence in recent decades:

The process of attaining self-knowledge can be lonely and painful. Some of the best women poets writing today—Denise Duhamel, Allison Joseph, Laura Kasischke, Diane Seuss-Brakeman, Betsy Sholl, and Belle Waring, to name just a few—often tackle the tough subjects of sexuality, love and self-worth, family history, and cultural and political identity with fresh, ironic humor or smart, jazzy riffs of narrative infused with the poets' love of language. Others, like Kim Addonizio, Jan Beatty, Jane Mead, Sapphire, and the late Lynda Hull, cut closer to the bone in sparer, more declarative, more directly confessional tones; but for the most part their work is ultimately hopeful.

David Graham and Kate Sontag have gathered together in their anthology a diverse group of contemporary poets who offer interesting and compelling views on what might be the dominant form of poetry at the opening of the twenty-first century, poetry as autobiography. As Alan Williamson writes in his essay, "Stories about the Self":

It might be that, for a literary historian from the future, the most interesting technical development in American poetry in the last two decades of this century would be the refinement of (largely autobiographical) narrative. It would be a little surprising, since "confessional poetry"—almost from the moment that unfortunate term was coined—has been the whipping boy of half a dozen newer schools, New Surrealism, New Formalism, Language poetry.

Nearly half a century after the rise of confessional poetry, and another century since the initial line written in Whitman's "Song of Myself," American poets are still wrestling with the inner conflict created by promoting the self in one's poems, blending fact with fiction, balancing the private and the public, or possibly compromising a concern for ethical behavior in presenting one's literary persona while producing effective poetry. In the midst of all this, the essays collected in *After Confession: Poetry as Autobiography* represent an important and impressive touchstone, setting a standard by which future discussions on this topic, of which there should be many, will be measured.

Graham, David and Sontag, Kate, eds. *After Confession: Poetry as Autobiography*. Saint Paul, Minnesota: Graywolf Press, 2001. ISBN 1-55597-355-8 \$17.95

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