

Irony and Yearning in W. D. Snodgrass, John Berryman, and Allen Ginsberg: A Close Reading of Three of their Confessional Poems

Hristo Boev
“Konstantin Preslavsky” University of Shumen
Bulgaria

Abstract

This paper examines three poems by three American poets – W. D. Snodgrass, J. Berryman and A. Ginsberg who subscribe to the confessionalism of the 1950s and 60s being largely spared the complication of clinical depression which plagued the other three major confessionalists – Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, and Robert Lowell. Not having a severe form of it – Snodgrass – has resulted in generally more light-hearted texts by them containing irony and yearning which differ in mood from the rather mostly bleak verses of the other three mentioned American poets. These three, however, were also perfectly capable of their own personal darkness represented in verse and in turn did not fail to scandalize with the content of some of their verses. The paper also discusses the power of sincerity in these autofictional poems vs what could have been mere authenticity of dissimulated lived experience. As such, it aims to dispel possible attacks of self-display or glorification, as well as of possible victimization that autofictive poets, including some of the ones under scrutiny, have come under.

Keywords: *autofiction, 1950s, confessional, irony, sincerity, authenticity.*

1. An early evaluation of the American confessional movement in poetry

In the “Forward” to his book on Dylan Thomas, Alen Ginsberg, Sylvia Plath and Robert Lowell, Louis Simpson (1978), two decades later, says the following about what he sees as their common trait:

The poets in this book created art out of the confusion of their lives. The Ginsberg in *Kaddish*, the Lowell in *Life Studies*, the Plath in *Ariel* are self-portraits, not literal representations. There is hardly any need for mirror images of life. The poets, however, were not always selective, and at times they lapsed into merely stating what they had seen and felt" (Simpson 1978: xiv).

Simpson's evaluation and subsequent judgement of perceived lived experience as unworthy poet's food for the quill have proved to be premature, but they are worthy of being considered all the same, and so he continues, "now, in order for a man's feelings to be important in themselves he must be a kind of a saint. Attention shifts from the work to the life, and the lives of most poets won't bear inspection" (xiv). Simpson continues with his criticism of the method thus:

So the poet works up his feelings, his occupation now is seeming to be sincere, and the fabric collapses. The mixture of life and poetry has been fatal in some cases. But there are signs that the vogue for confessional writing may be coming to an end" (Simpson 1978: xiv).

Written in 1978, Simpson's book announces other poetical preoccupations which he believed would be more future proof. In that we know he was mistaken. We do not need to be *saints* to write autofiction. Nor do our lives need to be beautiful to look at to be turned into poetry or prose for that matter. If we look back in time, we may be able to trace confessionalist expression as early as Wordsworth and Keats who, in their different ways of turning contemplation and communion with nature into brilliant poetry, set the tone for this mode of poeticizing.

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It was Walt Whitman about 30 years later and on the other side of the Atlantic that in his "Song of Myself" proclaimed: "I celebrate myself,/ and what I assume you shall assume,/ For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you" (Whitman 2005: 7).

2. The confessionalists' achievement and legacy

What the confessionalists did, revisiting early 19th century poetical modernity, was do away with the conceited romantic conventions of recreating imaginative relived identifications with sterile open nature – Wordsworth's clouds, flowers, lakes, and grass or with symbolic mythological animals of the forest – as would be Keats's dryads, nymphs, squirrels, and nightingales. The 1950s poets turned their eyes on themselves and had the courage to offer verisimilar images of their selves as serious poetic subjects, exploring themselves and their poetic selves relentlessly, ruthlessly, arriving at images of themselves devoid of pity. And it is precisely because this endeavor would not always yield a pretty picture that they should be recognized as having been brave in sharing their possible ugliness and in inviting potential identifications on part of the reader who should doff his or her prudishness and respond to bravery in kind.

3. W. D. Snodgrass and his "April Inventory"

W. D. Snodgrass's acclaimed *Heart's Needle* was published in 1959 and with it he had already made a name for himself as a poet to be envied by Plath, who in her *Journals* refers to him as a pluralized fame-hungry human monster "the crass Snodgrasses" (Plath 2007: 431).

In the mid-1950s, when Plath was trying to break through as a poet, Snodgrass was an established literary figure and poet comparable to Lowell, Berryman, and Ginsberg. He had four marriages and died in 2009 from lung cancer, having had a long and well-respected poet's career.

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His first major collection deals with his separation from his daughter Cynthia, resulting from his first divorce. Unlike the majority of the fellow confessionalists he was not depressive, and this meant that he had a much more cheerful poetic disposition, which made him capable of expressing various themes in wide-ranging tones and moods.

His signature line is: "Snodgrass is walking through the universe."

The poem "April Inventory" from his critically acclaimed collection and included in his *Selected Poems: 1957-1987*, in prevalent iambic pentameter, begins with a description of a tree which bears an uncanny resemblance to a living person: "The green catalpa tree has turned/ All white; the cherry blooms once more" (Snodgrass 1991: 17). The introduction of the hitherto hidden person is abrupt: "In one whole year I haven't learned/ A blessed thing they pay you for" (17). The couplet of the first sextet stanza contains two rhyming lines, the rhyming pattern being *ababcc*. The comparison to the whiteness of the tree forebodes the advancing age of the poet, only 30 at the moment of writing the poem, which coexists with the cherry blooming yet again and anticipates the arrival of young girls who can be likened to cherries, suggesting healthy plumpness and joyful innocence. The couplet completes the comparison to the tree thus: "The blossoms snow down in my hair;/ The trees and I will soon be bare" (17), which suggests the poet's losing his hair and the subsequent loss of the cherries (girls). This anticipatory principle is preserved and from being hidden, the girls appear in the next stanza: "The trees have more than I to spare./ The sleek, expensive girls I teach,/ Younger and pinker every year,/ Bloom gradually out of reach" (17). This reference is to the private University of Cornell, Ithaca, New York, but Snodgrass was to teach poetry classes as well and one of his young female students was Anne Sexton herself.

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The more the girls blossom, the more unattainable they become since they would be looking for boyfriends at their own age and probably of their own wealth, thus the poet observes how his manly attraction yearly declines. In the next stanza, the poem becomes comic-hilarious by underlining the deepening discrepancy between the poet and the girls: "This year they smile and mind me how/ My teeth are falling with my hair./ In thirty years I may not get/ Younger, shrewder, or out of debt" (17). As the poem progresses, Snodgrass makes a succinct summary of the mediocrity surrounding him, not failing to be self-ironic: "I haven't read one book about/ A book or memorized one plot./ Or found a mind I did not doubt./ I learned one date. And then forgot./ And one by one the solid scholars/ Get the degrees, the jobs, the dollars" (Snodgrass 1991: 18).

The poem continues with what the poet has obtained as knowledge through the praxis of sympathy with the suffering of the others, but also by standing behind his words as an identical personality to that of the lyrical speaker:

"I taught myself to name my name,/ To bark back, loosen love and crying;/ To ease my woman so she came,/ To ease an old man who was dying./ I have not learned how often I/ Can win, can love, but choose to die" (Snodgrass 1991: 18). The poem ends with the natural evolution of the man-tree as opposed to girl-wife, instilling a strong sensation of the withering man losing vitality contrasted with girls reaching their ripe stage of wives who have children and, therefore, are not *bare* (barren, naked, exposed), unlike aging men or old trees.

The poem ends in a reconciliatory philosophical mood which predicts a calm not unpleasant future whose human legacy will be *gentleness* and *loveliness*, coming with a warning about the price we will be paying for knowledge: "We shall afford our costly seasons;/ There is a gentleness survives/ That will outspoke and has its reasons./ There is a loveliness exists,/ Preserves us, not for specialists" (Snodgrass 1991: 18). The very ending in three words is ironic while the *specialists* appear to be those dealing with literature, doubting the real knowledge that can be obtained from studying literary texts, specialists, who, on top of that, including himself, suffer from mediocrity. They would be rummaging in forgotten lore and would be not unlike the speaker from Poe's "The Raven", suggesting that studying poetry for knowledge is futile and could lead to madness. Poetry, according to this metacritical text, should be enjoyed for its capacity to send us into dreamworlds where we find ourselves in the cosmic harmony of reigning beauty, health and happiness, or the little precious that has been left of them, thus evoking the eternal opening lines of Keats's "Endymion":

A thing of beauty is a joy forever:/ Its loveliness increases; it will never/ Pass into nothingness; but still will keep/ A bower quiet for us, and a sleep/ Full of sweet dreams, and health, and quiet breathing./ Therefore, on every morrow are we wreathing/ A flowery band to bind us to the earth/ spite of despondence, of the inhuman dearth/ Of noble natures, of the gloomy days" (Keats 1900: 187).

We can say that Snodgrass with his "There is a loveliness exists,/ Preserves us", as well as with his reference to corrupted human nature, has articulated the shortest possible explanation of the famous opening by Keats, containing the exact unusual word *loveliness* in a modern poem.

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Here Snodgrass offers a double vision – the poet as a confessional self, open to the reader, and the poet as a critic. It is the first that Snodgrass chooses – he is vulnerable and exposed to criticism while the critic (*specialist*) from his lofty tower of blissful ignorance can arrogantly destroy everything in the poem, except its uncanny substance which makes it unique and gives it the right to be called *poem*. Our gentle and sympathetic human touch is for everyone else through directly getting the meaning or message that it makes, without overburdening it with interpretations it does not have or butchering it with critical analyses.

4. Berryman and his “Sonnet 23”

In the mid-1950s Berryman was already a recognized poet whose fame was to be sealed with his *The Dream Songs* (1964). Some of them exploit the topic of his father’s suicide which left 11-year-old Berryman traumatized. In this paper, however, I will analyze one of Berryman’s highly original sonnets published in 1967, but as content dating to the late 1940s, when the poet had an extramarital affair with a married woman called Chris Haynes. The publication of the sonnets became possible due to his having divorced his wife in 1953. Plath does not say anything about Berryman, but one can safely assume that in her book the poet came under the label of “the crass Snodgrasses”. The prelude to the sonnets, another sonnet in form, includes the following lines: “He made a thousand years ago, a-many songs/ for an excellent lady, wif whom he was in wuv, shall now he publish them?” (Berryman 1991: 10). The final lines go as follows: “The original fault was whether wickedness/ was soluble in art. History says it is, Jacques Maritain says it is, barely/ So free them to the winds that play,/ let boys & girls with these old songs have holiday,/ if they feel like it” (10).

The last line comes fifteenth, as an afterthought. In this prelude Berryman raises yet again the issue of what from the life of a poet should be publishable. Since everything once published becomes history by default, this is a reason good enough for the publication of the forbidden sonnets.

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They may suppose, because I would not cloy your ear –
If ever these songs by other ears are heard –
With 'love' and 'love', I loved you not, but blurred
Lust with strange images, warm, not quite sincere,
To switch a bedroom Black. O mutineer
With me against these empty captains! Gird
Your scorn again above all at *this* word
Pompous and vague on the stump of his career.
Also I fox 'heart', striking a modern breast
Hollow as a drum, and 'beauty' I taboo;
I want a verse fresh as a bubble breaks,
As little false... Blood of my sweet unrest
Runs all the same – I am in love with you –
Trapped in my rib-cage something throes and aches! (Berryman
1991: 34)

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Sonnets are always a matter of personal preference and I do believe they speak volumes about the reader's sensibility and his or her intimate experience with the respective sonnet. All the famous sonneteers in the English language such as Shakespeare, Elizabeth Browning, Meredith, and Spenser made good use of the sonnet form and enriched considerably its content, offering a wide range of nuances from the philosophical to the romantic. Since Shakespeare's remarkable sonnets, irony and self-irony have also been present; the variety of the content is apparently inexhaustible as attested to by Sherman Alexie's 21st century take on the sonnet, "The Facebook Sonnet" (2011). Berryman here preserves the 14-line standard and makes not only each line, but each word in his sonnet matter. The sonnet in question imagines a situation of a clandestine publishing of the text where the lack of ostentatious display of love feelings in the preceding sonnets is perceived by the ones who have read them as a sign of mistaking *love* for *lust*. The lyrical speaker entreats the lady with whom he has had a sexual relationship, judging by depictions of her breasts serving as a compass from the previous sonnets, as well as here – *the bedroom* turned *black*, to rebel against the empty words of *captains*, that is, the ones who are crying out loud their insistence on love being pronounced as often as possible. To the speaker, it is a *Pompous* word with a capital "p".

Each word used strikes the reader as novel and the sensation is of a situation where everything is brand-new and different, therefore stereotypes are bound to crumble – *gird Your scorn*. The *mutineer* is being asked to join the speaker in a "silent accord" as David Gilmour sings in "On the Turning Away".

The lady should show that she understands, but not mar the *career* – the conjugal growth of the husband – as marriage could be a career like any other; it may not have much to do with free will. The lines in the third stanza do not make sense as the speaker searches desperately for the best utterance and all of a sudden, we see the clear – *I want a verse fresh as a bubble breaks*. The next line raises the question that inasmuch as the lady may know the speaker, still she herself, not his love detractors, may perceive his new words as ringing *a little false*, but that brings us to the impossibility, in this case, to express the speaker's feelings for her with words because, regardless of the freshness of the phrase, certainly it will have been used already by someone somewhere. How can love be expressed? Romeo's famous love definitions would fail in an age where such big words have turned into platitudes. Nor can E. Browning's exclamation: "How do I love thee? Let me count the ways" (Browning 2009: 231) be of any use. Both examples are made highly inappropriate by the nature of the respective relationships by comparison. The speaker can only describe the physical sensation as it affects his very being – inner turmoil of *throes and aches* used as verbs for a yet higher intensity.

As it has been noted by many, Berryman's confessional mode reveals a complex personality, a character who resists labeling, a multifaceted human being of flesh and blood, transformed into literary selves. A Berryman scholar, John Haffenden (1979), points out that the main subject of the poet was "the soul under stress, and under observation" (Haffenden 1979: 1), as well as the fact that it was "Berryman's, and that the poet is everywhere at the centre of his work" (1), which undoubtedly underscores the confessionals' dedication to expressing the essentials of human experience through the autofictional.

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5. Ginsberg and his "Message"

Apart from being a confessional poet, Allen Ginsberg was one of the major figures of the beat movement, which had confessionality at the very core of their writings and creed.

In 1958 after the success of his famous “Howl”, in Paris with Peter Orlovsky, Ginsberg’s lifetime companion, and with William Burrows, they had managed to have yet another *take* on the expat experience after the (in)famous previous generation of Dos Passos, Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Gertrude Stein and Henry Miller. Plath did not say in writing anything about Ginsberg, but if she had, it would undoubtedly have been something rather unpleasant for the male poet, considering his homosexuality – Plath was no Adrienne Rich and despite her ultimate disappointment in Ted Hughes, she was not able to have a relationship with another man, or with a woman. Despite their major differences in sexuality and writing style, Plath and Ginsberg are often grouped together as fellow confessionalists who made their contribution to the movement in their own ways, exploring the aesthetic of personal suffering. While commenting on Ginsberg’s poetic principles, Erik Mortenson refers to Ginsberg’s discussion with university students from 1971 in which the American poet sees writing “as an unrepeatable act occurring at the point where mind and body encounter the world” (Mortenson 2017: 77), thus showcasing Ginsberg’s spontaneity and his original choice of words. In writing like this, the writer’s consciousness reacts to the ever-changing present arriving at “an ongoing process of revelation” (Mortenson 2017: 77). Such a writing evidently aims to capture the moment and seems to resolve the problem with Husserl’s *retention* (Husserl 1991: 169) – what has been consciously retained from the event in the memory. Still, the capture of that striking moment does not exclude revising the text as a post-processing (Mortenson 2017: 80). Ginsberg’s predilection for immediacy, which also extends to other famous Beats such as Kerouac, is also reflected in the numerous photographs they have of themselves in different surroundings (Lawlor 2017: 31).

In his “Message” from Paris we can see Ginsberg at his best, making an economical use of compressed vocabulary which succinctly renders a history of living together and of subsequent loneliness:

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Since we had changed/ rogered spun worked/ wept and pissed together/ I wake up in the morning/ with a dream in my eyes/ but you are gone in NY/ remembering me Good/ I love you I love you/ & your brothers are crazy/ I accept their drunk cases (Ginsberg 2015: 53).

In the style typical for the Beats, Ginsberg renders the atmosphere of camaraderie by the seemingly incompatible *wept* and *pissed* being placed next to each other, which reminds one of yet another fellow expat from the previous epoch – Henry Miller who would masterfully write his ground-breaking natural novels – the *Tropics – of Cancer* and *Capricorn* as well as the *Rosy Crucifixion* series. The next lines are longer and expository of the lyrical speaker’s predicament: “It’s too long that I have been alone/ It’s too long that I’ve sat up in bed/ without anyone to touch on the knee, man/ or woman I don’t care what anymore, I/ want love I was born for I want you with me now” (53). The utter loneliness expressed by the speaker is excruciating, containing (post)modernist irony – being desperate for love and human touch while being in the most romantic city of all – Paris; in the same year another work, emblematic of the theme, was produced – Edward Albee’s one-act play *The Zoo Story* (1959). The poem portrays separation painfully felt – the enormous distance to New York which, however, is overcome in the following lines. It is through the imagination of the speaker who is visually transported where his love is: “Ocean liners boiling over the Atlantic/ Delicate steelwork of unfinished skyscrapers/ Back end of the dirigible roaring over Lakehurst/ Six women dancing together on a red stage naked” (Ginsberg 2015: 53).

The images are vivid and detailed, yet we know that this was just an American daydream in Paris when Ginsberg returns to reality: "The leaves are green on all the trees in Paris now/ I will be home in two months and look you in the eyes" (53). There is nothing of the European beauty of Paris here, reminiscent of a novel by Anton Holban, *A Death That Proves Nothing* (*O moarte care nu dovedește nimic*) (1931) where the protagonist and narrator, after having dreamt of going to Paris, finds himself sitting on a bench in the French city, writing letters to his beloved that he left in Bucharest and capable of thinking of nothing but her (Holban 2008: 256). Consequently, Paris, just like with Ginsberg, is completely deprived of represented physicality.

Conclusions

Aiming to offer multiple perspectives of actual lived experience and fictional selves during the 1950s, this paper has made it its point to compare three American confessional poems of well-known poets in effectuating a close reading of the proposed works. So, the comparative analysis came to the conclusions that in the poems by different poets under scrutiny: "April Inventory", "Sonnet 23", and "Message", Snodgrass's poem is darkly comic, and we can see a more fluid change of scenes and ideas in it, not the fragmentary sequences which we observe in Lowell and Plath and to an extent in Sexton. Berryman's sonnet demonstrates what a poetic form can give to a technical virtuoso like himself as well as the numerous possibilities poetry can have through the confessional mode. Ginsberg's poem takes a step further as to the usage of "unacceptable" vocabulary, something we do not see with the others.

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In his poem, Ginsberg is the most at ease with his choice of words – they are completely natural and that makes his poem the most modern of all. Ginsberg believed neither in the existence of specific poetic vocabulary, nor in any other impositions on the poetic form – it was supposed to flow freely and naturally, while creating memorable scenes full of detail. It should be noted that all three poems show a remarkable concern with transgressive knowledge: with Snodgrass – poems should probably not be analyzed while we identify with the professor or his female students; with Berryman – love cannot be expressed with words – it is completely impossible and this impossibility leads to a silent resistance to love-related accusations; with Ginsberg – when the loved one is not around, one lives in one's dreams and the actual location becomes truly immaterial, everything is allowed in poetry. The cultural references of the confessionals should also be considered as fascinating insights into the life of the 1950s, and there are many – from the cozy college atmosphere in Snodgrass and the current for the times academic practices to the imagined American exterior in Ginsberg while being in Paris.

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It can be argued that the so-called “silent generation” of the 1950s was more tolerant to the ways of the men who could rebel in ways that would keep them rather *silent*. So there came the dissenters – the Beats who practiced a free form of experiencing the 1950s – in a more commune-based kind of living – among whom some of the major writers of the age – Kerouac, Kesey and Ginsberg. A strong reaction to the authoritarian post-WW2 Age, the Beats and the confessionals, in sharing the personal experience at the core of their works, offered to the gaze of the world the “unpresentable” Mr. Hydish side of physically and psychologically tormented human beings who were not imbued with an over-bloated image of their own egos, but were projections of sensitive despondent selves that were reaching out in a silent (nonverbalized outside their literary works) cry for help, which made them, on the outside, very much part of the “silent generation” like all the others.

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This perception was expressed by Al Alvarez who regretted not having seen Plath's poetry as exactly this desperate attempt at connecting to the others (*Sylvia Plath*) rather than the common for the Age perception of "narcissistic selves" who were advertising, quite inappropriately, their authors' repulsive unorthodox inner sides. Indeed, as Paul Gaston, a Snodgrass scholar claims, "The strength of such poetry has been measured, both by its critics and by Snodgrass himself, in terms of 'the depths of its sincerity'" (Gaston 1978: 15). A Romanian highly autobiographical writer, Cella Serghi, with her *The Spider's Web* (*Pânza de păianjen*) from 1938 found herself under attack for the perceived sincerity of her novel, "'You've offered yourself with too much sincerity.'" (Serghi 2018: 267), to which she defiantly replies, "'Sincerity is a gift like any other,' says Julien Green¹, 'not everyone who wants it can have it'"² (267). As the Romanian writer suggests, we should not denigrate literary texts for their proven autobiographical content, but rather consider it an opportunity for further research which allows for explorations of what added value the autobiographical is to the text. The verbal exchange between the same protagonists in her *Memories* (*Pe firul de păianjen al memoriei*) (2018) also contains the following: "'What is the novel's idea?' he [C. Petrescu] asks to get me into a predicament. 'There will be specialists who will find the idea, I have offered them [the characters] life'" (Serghi 2018: 267).

In distinguishing the qualities of the American confessionals from previous iterations of confessionalism in English and American literature, Gaston underscores "[the] high degree of specialization in the revelation of the poet's private concerns" (Gaston 1978: 17).

¹ A bilingual writer living and writing in France, in English and French, most of his writings in English being his own translations, mainly famous for his *Léviathan* (1929). – a. n.

² All cited translations from Romanian are mine. – a. n.

And perhaps the most important trait: “[it] seems not a genre for occasional adoption, but the only plausible stylistic alternative appropriate to a specific period of acute psychological and artistic introspection” (Gaston 1978: 18). A projection of its author’s innermost self, the autofictional should be judged for its poetical qualities regardless of the very personal touch and, if found worthy of critical attention, attempts should be made to ascertain the contribution of the shared intimacies, without disregarding what may as well be a desperate cry in the void. Since it is impossible to distinguish between what has been part of the lived experience of the author and what has been invented, unless one knows that beforehand through knowing the author personally, and also because the literary text is typically marketed as fiction, not autofiction, it should be acknowledged that we cannot speak of any glorification or victimization of the author through his or her autofictional selves, but rather we should respect the difficult decision which has resulted in ruthless self-analysis and exposure to the world.

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Hristo Boev

Hristo Boev

affiliation: Konstantin Preslavsky University of Shumen, Faculty of Humanities

position: Associate Professor

e-mail: h.boev@shu.bg

research interests: Geocriticism, Literary Phenomenology, Literary Urbanism, Modernism, the Victorian Age, the Art of Translation

Selected publications:

- (2023): "The Autofictional Ailing Self: Depression in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* and Cella Serghi's *The Spider's Web* - a Comparison" (Hristo Boev), in *Studies in Linguistics, Culture and FLT*, vol. 11, Issue 2, pp. 110-129.
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