

**CONFESSION AND POETRY:
FEMALE CONFSSIONALISM
IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY
AMERICA**

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Chapter 1:

Theoretical Approaches to Confessional Poetry

I. Confessionalism and Theory

1.1. A Brief History of the Practice of Confession

In *The Compulsion to Confess* (1961), Theodor Reik speaks of confession and the “urge for expression” as a force which threatens to “shape the destiny of us all” (qtd. in Gill, *Modern Confessional Writing* 6). What exactly is this “force” that compels us to “express”, and why should it affect all of us? Peter Brooks asks himself a similar question: “what is it about confession that makes it such a difficult and slippery notion to deal with? Why do we worry about confessions and their truth value, not only in the law but in literature and in daily life?” (11). In other words, why is the expression of truth in modern times such a hazardous business? These questions preoccupy us intensely because, as Michel Foucault best put it, the “Western man has become a confessing animal” (*History of Sexuality* 59); he or she is constantly searching for a better way to express who he or she is. In the following section we will try to answer some of those questions, while also examining how confession, as a concept and a process, has influenced the way we speak and write.

Etymologically, confession is an act of “acknowledgement” (“confess”, Online Etymology Dictionary), derived from the Latin “*confiteri*” which itself is made up of two particles: “*com*” (together) and “*fateri*” (speaking/admitting). Hence, confession is meant to be a shared, communal act. The idea of togetherness may not seem particularly relevant

in the act of confessing; after all, Shlomit Schuster argues that each philosopher engaged in confession wishes to “reveal his own true self” (qtd. in Taylor 2), and such an endeavor requires a certain kind of solipsism which frames the confession as an internal, individual activity. But is this accurate? Is individuality all that counts in the process? Foucault argues that confession does not simply happen in a vacuum; in every such act there is a *confessor* and a *confessant*, someone who “listens and says nothing” (*History of Sexuality* 61) and someone who speaks and says everything. Who is this silent audience and what role do they play in the confession? In order to ascertain their significance, we must first look at the cultural loci where confession is most prevalent.

Confession as a normative practice can be studied, as Brooks suggested above, in “the law” and its various apparatuses that are designed to gather information from the subject. In legal matters, confession represents a useful, but often unreliable tool of disclosure; as G.H. Gudjonsson explains in *The Psychology of Interrogations and Confessions* (2003), authorities are most interested in the “accuracy” and “completeness” of a given statement (2), which is why they are often concerned with the possibility that a confession has been delivered under pressure, or altered by external influence (1). This is a psychological conundrum that has been explored in literary form as well; look no further than the character of Nikolai Dementiev in Dostoyevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*, a painter who willingly confesses to a crime he did not commit out of a mistaken feeling of guilt. This tendency to confess to a “wrongdoing” is considered by American Chief Justice Warren Burger to be a “human urge” that is “normal, in all save hardened, professional criminals” (qtd. in Taylor 2). Talmudic law, however, believes that this kind of self-incrimination stems from a “death-drive” (Brooks 21), an urge to bring about “punishment or even self-annihilation” (21). This urge, Freud also asserts, is born out of a sense of guilt which manifests at an unconscious level and which must be satisfied through punishment (c.f. Brooks 21).

But the urge to confess often overlaps with the simple verbalization of a confession. Linguistically, the confessant is placed under an assumption of guilt from the moment he or she utters “I confess” (Brooks 21), since the speech act of confession entails both an utterance and an action. As theorized by J.L. Austin, a speech act contains both a constative and a

performative aspect (c.f. Brooks 21). Hence, if the speaker begins his or her statement with "I confess", the **constative** aspect refers to the sin or wrongdoing he or she has committed, whereas the performative aspect refers to the action of atoning for that sin and demanding absolution or punishment (21). Brooks gives the example of Catholic confession, wherein the confessant begins with the formal utterance, "Bless me Father, for I have sinned" (21). In this case, the constative aspect is the confessant informing the priest that he or she has committed sins, but the performative aspect behind it is the confessant asking for forgiveness (21). The problem with these two aspects is that they happen simultaneously within the speech act and that when an individual says "I confess", the underlying assumption is that he or she also wishes to make amends for a wrongdoing, meaning that their guilt is as good as certain. As such, "the performative aspect will produce the constative, [and] create the sin or guilt that the act of confessing requires" (Brooks 21). Given the linguistic entrapment which the act of confessing entails, it is difficult to judge the individual's psychological intent or the certainty of his or her guilt.

Of course, the individual is encouraged to confess, no matter the reality behind his or her "sins". The desire to be punished or forgiven only escalates the more one confesses (Brooks 22), because the process of confession bears a deeply emotional effect on the confessant. Indeed, Foucault strengthens the argument when he posits that expressing guilt "exonerates, redeems and purifies the confessant" and "promises him salvation" (*History of Sexuality* 62). Whether or not the confessant is actually guilty seems to be a moot point; the verbalization of what Erik Berggren calls "oppressed secrets" (qtd. in Taylor 1) is an act of liberation. Nikolai Dementiev of *Crime and Punishment* is not guilty of killing anyone, but by admitting to an imaginary crime, he is freed from a psychological burden and offered salvation.

In order for the liberation to have full effect, however, the confessor (the one who "listens") must wield enough power to confer it; in other words, the authorities must be able to "prescribe and appreciate" (Foucault, *History of Sexuality* 61) the confession in order for the confessant to feel release. This means that there is a clear power relation between the two parties. The confessant is bound to make an appeal, and the confessor "is called upon as witness and judge of its efficaciousness"

(Brooks 95). Such a power relation is often **found in religious** practices as well, and it is here, in fact, that various **theories of confession** emerge in relation to the truth and the self. The **Christian faith, in particular**, believes in the power of confession to purge sin, as St Augustine of Hippo stipulates: “*qui facit veritatem venit ad lucem*” (qtd in Taylor 17), meaning that speaking the truth paves the path to the light (17). St Augustine’s famous confessional work entitled *Confessions* was highly influential both within and outside sacred writings. His belief was that, “by knowing one’s sins and temptations, and by bearing witness to these sins and temptations in the presence of others, a Christian could better access the truth of God” (Taylor 17). To put matters differently, confession is a rite of passage towards knowledge of a higher truth, but it also implies a degree of self-knowledge. This self-knowledge is only obtained by appealing to the judgment of others: one must know one’s “sins and temptations” and then one must “bear witness... in the presence of others”. Sin is expunged through a period of self-reflection and afterwards, a public confession, which implies at least one more party being present.

The interconnectedness of sin and confession has been explored at length by Michel Foucault in *History of Sexuality, vol I*. He notes that the act of confessing became linked with a specific kind of sin; the sin of the flesh (19). Hence, “the confession of the flesh” dominates the rituals of penance and provides a framework for the confessor to testify to any deviance related to the flesh, including “thoughts, desires, voluptuous imaginings, delectations, combined movements of the body and soul” (19). The flesh is fashioned into a signifier of innocence for both body and mind, to the extent that confession is transformed into a process of vigilant self-examination whose purpose is to prevent “thoughts” and “desires” from disturbing the flesh (20). The ultimate goal is to reform the sinner by dwelling on things which may seem “trivial and insignificant” (20), but which to the confessional apparatus are anything but unimportant. Confession must **nurture both** a medium of lofty inquiry and one of inconsequential detail **which leaves no possible door unchecked**: “no obscurity, no respite” (20). **The idea** of repeatedly “telling”, of disclosing any thoughts and actions **related to sex**, becomes part and parcel of the individual’s sexual existence (20); he or she is not fully a sexual being until they *confess* they are. Indeed, **the caveat** of confession is that every desire has to be transformed into

discourse (21). As such, desire itself is modified, whether through multiplication or re-contextualization (23), and becomes dependent on its verbalization. You confess what you desire, and you desire what you confess.

This dualism leads to the idea that confession ultimately betrays one's desires, simply through the act of speaking. The sin of the flesh is transferred from a personal to a public sphere and thus becomes "real", and this places the confessant in a submissive position, where he or she awaits judgment. As Foucault clearly states,

The confession is a ritual of discourse in which the speaking subject is also the subject of the statement; it is also a ritual that unfolds within a power relationship, for one does not confess without the presence (or virtual presence) of a partner who is not simply the interlocutor but the authority who requires the confession, prescribes and appreciates it, and intervenes in order to judge, punish, forgive, console (...) (*History of Sexuality*, 62)

Here we should pause to expand on the phrase "a ritual of discourse" and what it means for confession. The issue of discourse and discursive power was tackled by Foucault in *The Order of Things* (1966) where he posited that each historical age was defined by a certain type of discourse which influenced the very direction of history and society. In the seventeenth and eighteenth century, in particular, Foucault argues that a shift took place by which:

all language had value only as discourse. The art of language was a way of 'making a sign' – of simultaneously signifying something and arranging signs around that thing; an art of naming, therefore, and then, by means of a reduplication both demonstrative and decorative, of capturing that name, of enclosing and concealing it, of designating it in turn by other names that were the deferred presence of the first name, its secondary sign, its figuration, its rhetorical panoply (48).

As we see from the quote above, language gains value as a connotative instrument which reduplicates, captures, encloses, conceals, designates. These verbs all point to a certain power which discourse wields, namely to designate one name "by other names", to replace one representation for another. Indeed, Foucault suggests that discourse is a "representation providing the articulation for another [representation]"

(*The Order of Things* 109). The jargon of certain **professions**, social classes or age groups is a form of discourse, because **it identifies** every member belonging to that faction through specialized **speech**, while also making sure to keep out those who do not adhere to **the linguistic code** (Oliver 29). There is a marked difference between a **person who** wields the dominant discourse and someone who is not fluent in it, and that difference will manifest itself in an imbalance of power. If we return to the definition of confession as “a ritual of discourse”, we will see that it is not enough to confess to an interlocutor vested with power over us, but we must also adhere to a certain linguistic code when engaged in the act of confession. We must formulate our confession so as to make it *sound* like a true admission within the strictures of the power relation. Therefore, to confess means to say “I confess”, “I admit”, “I am guilty of...”, therefore placing ourselves within a submissive discourse. The problems that arise from such a ritual of discourse are that of truth and autonomy. It seems that the confessant is encouraged to confess, but only as long as the confession is delivered in a “prescribed” manner, which the confessor (the authority) may condone. In other words, the confessor must approve of the confessant’s discourse.

The prescriptive quality of confession is particularly relevant in religious practices. The notion that a confessor is carefully monitoring the confessant’s speech is encapsulated in St. Augustine’s famous aphorism on the ubiquity of the divine audience: “The abyss of the human conscience lies naked to your eyes, O Lord, so would anything in me be secret even if I were unwilling to confess to you? I would be hiding you from myself, but not myself from you” (179). The confessant need not always be willing to testify to his or her sins since God is always watching and listening anyway. Rather, confession is a chance to acknowledge that one *knows* God is always present. Throughout Christian history, confession has acted as a useful signifier for the belief in God; after all, St. Augustine writes that he is not writing his *Confessions* to God: “rather, in your presence I am relating these events to my own kin” (28). Hence, St. Augustine is writing to fellow believers who understand the potency of the phrase “in your (God’s) presence”. The prescriptive nature of confession, **then**, stems from the notion that you are never alone with your thoughts, **nor should you be**.