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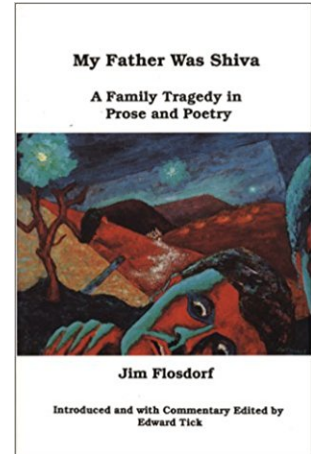
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Article

The Rhetoric of Confessional Poetry (Revisited): Ethos, Myth, Therapy, and the Narrative Configuration of Self

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The following essay is based on the penultimate version of the article published in *My Father Was Shiva* by Jim Florsdorf in 1994*. It has only been slightly revised for publication here in *Survive and Thrive* (but see the “Poetry Editor's Note: A Missive to Our Selves,” which updates and sets up the reappearance of the article below for this Volume). Here, as in the original article, the author at least tentatively suggests that confessional poetry is not necessarily therapeutic, and in some cases rhetorically may make psychological problems worse. “I” arrive at this tentative conclusion after considering the rhetorical and psychological role that narrative plays in constructing not only our identities, but our life story, stories which we repeat to ourselves over and over again. Rhetorical analysis is not often applied to the analysis of poetry anymore. But in this article, it is not being used to interpret the literary meaning of poetry, but the social, psychological, and affective truthfulness of poetry. Narratives have their own fidelity created by the genre of the structure, and because they have to do with *ethoi*. (Strictly speaking, for Aristotle, the constructing of the *ethos*, the character of the speaker or writer created in a speech or a text, is necessary for the other two modes of appeal, *logos* and *pathos*, to persuasion.) These narratives, then, become powerfully persuasive—not only to those listeners and readers we tell them to, but also to ourselves. So if the narrative is wrong, or a destructive one... “I” think Rex’s “Endnote,” following this article, is yet another beautiful parsing and response to this article, and a different limitation on confessional poetry that goes beyond “my” original article/argument, and is also highly worth considering here and everywhere where human life is still the center of meaning, motive, and action.



*Katz, Steven B. “The Rhetoric of Confessional Poetry: Ethos, Myth, and the Narrative Configuration of Self.” *My Father was Shiva: A Family Tragedy in Poetry and Prose with Psychological Interpretations*. Ed. Edward Tick. New York: Ablex, 1994: 109-36. Print.

“J'accuse!”

The practice of confession as a form of public expiation probably goes back to the beginning of human civilization. We see it in the wailing of the Old Testament, in the early cathartic Greek tragedies, in the ancient practice of public torture and confession, and in the confessional boxes of the Catholic church. Confession is central not only to religion but also to law, where confession leads to punishment as reformation and/or salvation. Confession is also central to psychotherapy, where (as in at least one view of religion) the penitent patient punishes him or herself until he or she confesses (Belgium). In the Freudian scheme of things, psychoanalysis actually can be understood to facilitate the patient's “confessing”—both to him or herself as well as to the therapist; in the act of psychoanalytic confession, repressed memories and pent up emotions are released, freeing up within the closed system of the mind psychic energy that can be used for other, healthier relationships. Thus, the act of “confessing” is necessary for the process of healing to begin.

There are two assumptions concerning confession: that we have something to confess (our Judeo-Christian heritage, if not our daily lives, provides us with material), and that the act of confessing helps relieve conscience, release guilt.

Indeed, the need for and practice of confession seems to be rooted deep in our psyche and our culture. It should be no surprise then that confession is also the basis of a prominent school of American poetry—aptly named “confessional poetry”—which takes the poet's tragic, guilt-ridden life to be the direct subject matter of poetry. Now, poetry is perhaps the only “public” medium of communication where intimate emotions are expressed honestly, openly, and for their own sake. (They certainly aren't in advertising, for instance, where they are used to sell products); indeed, poetry has been defined as the most efficient communication device of emotions [Perrine 3-10].) However, in reaction to nineteenth century romanticism in which twentieth century confessional poetry has its roots, formalists such as T. S. Eliot believed that to be a good poet one had to distance oneself from one's subject matter through “objective correlatives,” in which “images” and allusions to other literatures and civilizations replace personal expressions of emotion.

But just as in a pedestrian sense all psychotherapy can be considered “confessional,” all poetry can be considered confessional as well, insofar as a writer can only write about what they know, and what they know is filtered through their own knowledge and experience. In this sense, confession is related to the subjective nature of all our knowledge, a part of what Susanne Langer would call the necessary symbolization of raw reality—that “blumin', buzzin' confusion,” to use William James' phrase—into sensory information, and its subsequent resymbolization or interpretation into meaningful experience, knowledge, or art (*Philosophy; Feeling and Form*).

In most confessional poetry, however, the “direct” treatment of self as subject matter is taken literally and seriously. Most confessional poets believe that the poet's actual life experience is the only proper (and knowable) subject of poetry. In fact, in the *Ion*, Plato has Socrates question whether the poet can write about anything at all, except perhaps their own lunacy. In a somewhat specious argument built on a belief in the existence of Ideal Forms for everything, Socrates questions whether

poets can write about things that they do not “truly know” about because it is not their profession—ships, for example, since they are poets and not shipbuilders. And since Plato posits that poetry is a divine madness inspired by the gods, poetry can be neither true knowledge nor true art, but merely a raving imitation of physical or transcendental reality that only philosophers had access to. (Plato did not hold poets in high regard; he would not think much of psychologists either.)

In this essay, I will not attempt to discuss too much the nature and role of confession in psychology *per se*. Though I enrolled in somewhat more than the requisite courses in psychology as an undergraduate, have undergone psychotherapy, and possess more than a passing interest in the subject, let me “confess” that I am not a psychologist (though I often play one—not on TV, but in my duties as college professor, advisor, mentor, and friend). And enough has been written about this enormous subject in psychology to be readily accessible to the masochistic or curious. I am a rhetorician and a poet. As such, I am concerned with the persuasive character of language, here the role of persuasion in confessional poetry as a form of therapy. (I will define rhetoric in a moment.) What I propose to do in this essay, then, is to examine the question of the nature and value of confessional poetry as therapy by approaching it from a different angle—through a rhetorical discussion and analysis of Jim Flosdorf’s poetry in *My Father Was Shiva*.

Rhetoric and Poetry as Self

Although there has been surprisingly few books written on the nature and role of confessional poetry, there have been many attacks on the quality of confessional poetry. However, I have no intention of repeating the volley of criticism that has been levelled against confessional poetry as poetry, though much of it is justified. There is also much confessional poetry that is good (one thinks of the now classic work of the masters of confessional poetry: Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, Delmore Schwartz, or John Berryman, for example, though some of their work, like everything else that is human, is uneven). Nor do I intend to “critique” Jim’s poetry, at least not in the traditional, literary sense. My concern in this essay goes beyond questions of quality or art.

Rather, I want to examine confessional poetry as a rhetorical transaction, a construction of self in language. Generally, I want to ask: What is the nature of confessional poetry as a rhetorical construction, and how does it seek to persuade? What happens in and through the “language of confession” as a rhetorical transaction? Do poets really confess, or do they construct a public self in order to persuade? Is there a difference between confessing and constructing a public self? Is it therapeutically beneficial? Harmful? Neither? Both? What are some of the implications of the rhetorical construction of self for therapy? (I will leave the question of whether confession works *clinically* for the experts to ponder.) It is my belief that these questions about confessional poetry are not only relevant to psychotherapy but important for poetry as well, since the act of confessing in both therapy and poetry seems to be similar (but in fact may not be), and psychiatrists and therapists are increasingly realizing the role of language in their profession and its value in facilitating healing (Hobson). Some therapists even recommend poetry as a part of treatment (Ann Sexton’s perhaps being a more recent and most famous case).

It is also my belief that these questions can best be answered from a rhetorical rather than exclusively psychological or literary perspective, as is the fashion. Thus, to begin my discussion, let me define rhetoric and explain my approach a little more. It is generally well known that rhetoric is the art of persuasion first formulated by the ancient Greeks and Romans as the art of speaking well. Aristotle, the first philosopher to formally systematize the discipline, defined rhetoric as “the faculty of observing in any given case the available means of persuasion” (*Rhetoric* I ii 1355b26). Thus, unlike Plato who cast rhetoric as a collection of spurious techniques used to deceive and spread illusion (*Gorgias*; *Phaedrus*), Aristotle conceives of rhetoric as a means of discovering knowledge, albeit uncertain knowledge. (Plato was not fond of poets either.) In contemporary composition theory and research, personal, or “expressive” writing is even considered a process of discovering who we are, what we know (Britton; Elbow; Murray; Odell). (Unfortunately, most people still think of—and use—rhetoric as deception.)

Aristotle's definition of rhetoric is not the only one that will be useful in this essay. Skipping a few thousand years, the twentieth century has seen the development of several social theories of rhetoric. Given the belief in the uncertainty and relativity of knowledge (as opposed to objectivity and absolute truth) that has become a dominant theme in the twentieth century—even in science, such as in New Physics—persuasion has come to be regarded as the social basis of all knowledge, even scientific knowledge (Perelman, Burke, Kuhn). As Burke defines it, rhetoric is the art of inducing social cooperation among beings who by nature use symbols (*Motives*). In this “social-epistemic” view of rhetoric, there is an intrinsic relationship between language and knowledge, indeed, between language and thought itself, which some linguists also believe (Whorf; Farb; Lakoff and Johnson). In this social-epistemic view of rhetoric, knowledge, society, civilization itself would be impossible without rhetoric. Today, the study of rhetoric embraces all forms of communication as it reflects both persuasion and thought.

Thus, contrary to popular belief, rhetoric and poetry are not mutually exclusive, the first concerned with deceptive persuasion, the later illusionary Form. Not only can the roots of rhetoric as an oral tradition be traced back to poetry, but poetry can be understood and analyzed rhetorically, as an attempt to persuade a reader, to induce a reader's cooperation in the construction of meaning, value, and emotion. We can understand Form not in the Platonic sense, as an absolute to be studied for its own sake, but in the Burkean sense, as “the creation of an appetite in the mind of the auditor, and the adequate satisfying of that appetite” (Burke, *Counter-Statement* 31). So too we can understand confessional poetry not as private expression “overheard,” made public, but as a rhetorical transaction, a social construction of the experience of “self” created in the poem by poet and reader. It is also in this way that the reader is able to participate in the subjective, “personal” experience of the poet, validate it, make it her own.

There is also a relation between rhetoric and personality—not as we understand the latter today, as the psychological makeup of a relatively stable “self” that in many ways is conceived of as an Ideal Form as well (a statement I'm afraid Skinner would approve), but as Aristotle seems to have implicitly understood it, as “character” revealed in particular actions (*Nicomachean Ethics*, esp. II-III).

This notion of character manifested in behavior (rather than the distinction between private and public self) also can be used to comprehend the rhetorical nature of confessional poetry. Aristotle's concept of *ethos* (*Nicomachean Ethics* II i 1103a15; *Rhetoric* I ii 1356a1-15), from which we derive our notion of ethics as moral character that guides behavior, may prove useful here. The concept of *ethos* is in some respects similar to the more familiar concept of *personae*—the social “masks” that we don depending on the situation. As George Herbert Mead might say, these “masks” are internalized through the process of socialization and constitute different parts of our self. The ability to adopt the right *persona* for the social occasion is part of the rhetorical ability to adapt and adjust behavior and language to different situations. (The inability to adopt appropriate behaviors and language for different situations also can be understood as a rhetorical basis of schizophrenia [Tick]).

However, Aristotle makes a distinction between “character” as general behavior and *ethos* which is created by the art of rhetoric for the purpose of persuasion. While prior reputation based on general behavior is outside the realm of rhetoric for Aristotle, the character woven in and through a piece of discourse to persuade a specific audience is the subject of rhetoric proper. Thus, according to Aristotle, *ethos* is defined as the character that is created by language as an element of persuasion (*Rhetoric* I ii 1356a5-10). From a twentieth century perspective, then, *ethos* can be understood as character manifested or created in what Kenneth Burke calls “symbolic action,” that is, in language not only as a medium of communication but as a specifically human mode of social behavior. Clearly, while the rhetorical concept of *ethos* is limited in so far as it cannot take into account what we understand as the personal, private, “psychological” dimensions of personality, *ethos* is perhaps superior in that it does take into account the social, symbolic, and particularly the “rhetorical” nature of personality which many psychological theories downplay or ignore.

The rhetorical view of the writer as an individual who intentionally creates an *ethos* from socially internalized selves through language for the purposes of persuasion in some ways also transcends the current debate that is raging in the field of composition/rhetoric based on the perceived polarity between writing as an individual act vs. writing as a social act. The question has come to revolve around the issue of how to view, treat, and examine the whole concept and validity of “the author.” There is the traditional romantic view of the author as a “free agent” who intends and creates his/her text in inspiration and rhetorical isolation; the cognitive view in contemporary composition theory that seeks to replace the romantic view of the author by examining empirically and rationally the mental processes involved in writing; and finally the social-epistemic view that seeks to replace the notion of the author itself by studying writing as a confluence of cultural and linguistic forces that impinge on writers as loci of language and texts as socially determined artifacts.

The assumption in this essay is that the rhetorical concept of *ethos* as an individual choice of socially constructed selves reconciles some of these differences. Because the whole notion of rhetoric involves a choice of suitable social strategies for different situations, we can understand confessional poetry not just as the inspired expression of personal emotion, the operation of cognitive schemata, or social constructions only, but as a public, rhetorical presentation of self—as a “resymbolization” of experience into art for the purposes of persuasion. Indeed, the act of writing is itself a process of

constructing a self in language. While the notion of “self” can be traced to Descartes and even Plato, in *Rhetoric, Romance, and Technology* Walter Ong argues that the notion of the individual self as we know it today—as an isolated consciousness alienated from society—blossomed in 19th century literary romanticism; this notion of self is rooted not only in the industrial revolution and the rise of the bourgeoisie but also in the self-conscious reflection, isolation, and privatization of thought that writing and print technology inspire when absorbed into consciousness and culture. In other words, our whole notion of the self is literary, is based on and constituted in language and writing (also see Ong, *Orality and Literacy*).

Several more questions therefore arise concerning the nature of confessional poetry as therapy. Since for all intents and purposes the private self does not exist, or at least cannot be known apart from the language of the “public self” that is rhetorically created in confessional poetry (or in therapy), is true “confessional” poetry, and therapy, possible? Is it the very act of the symbolic, public construction of self (in confessional poetry and in therapy) that facilitates the formation of a “healthy” self, that is itself healthy? Is this how confession works? Is this how the self is made?

The Narrative Configuration of Self

To begin to answer these questions, before analyzing Jim Flosdorff’s poetry, it might help to understand how the self might be constructed in language from a narrative point of view as well. For this understanding I turn now to a relatively recent work that bridges rhetoric and psychology: *Narrative Knowing in the Human Sciences* by Donald Polkinghorne.

According to Polkinghorne, the self is neither material nor mental, but meaning constructed through narration, i.e., in language (149-152). As Polkinghorne says, “we achieve our personal identities and self-concept through the use of the narrative configuration, and make our existence into a whole by understanding it as an expression of a single unfolding and developing story” (150). In fact, for Polkinghorne, narration is “the primary form by which human experience is made meaningful” (1). Polkinghorne argues that narration (which he opposes to the formal logic of the research model used in the natural sciences) is a fundamental mode of perception and thought, one that in accordance with the “social-epistemic” view of rhetoric discussed in the introduction of this essay already presents experience to consciousness in language as meaningfully connected events ordered sequentially in time (68; 135). As Polkinghorne demonstrates, the narrative configuration of human experience is predominant in literature, history, and psychology—especially since Freud.

Indeed, for Polkinghorne, Freud was the father of the use of the narrative configuration of experience in therapy; narrative interpretation is the basis of psychoanalysis in that the therapist tries to uncover and understand the patient’s “life-story” (as Polkinghorne points out, in this way Freudian analysis is very literary), and to reinterpret and change this story that they tell themselves, that forms their identity, that they live, for the better. For Freud, the narrative interpretation of experience allows the therapist to move from present personality traits and disorders to past events through suggestions, associations, and the fragments of dreams, in order to explain the patient’s experience and construct a more complete, coherent, and meaningful story, a healthier self. “One’s

personal story or personal identity is a recollected self in which the more complete the story that is formed, the more integrated the self will be. Thus, self-knowledge is an appropriation of the past” (Polkinghorne 106). According to Polkinghorne, for Freud it did not seem to matter much whether that interpretation, that life-story was fact or fiction, true or false, as long as it adequately accounted for the present and led to personal understanding and growth (119-121; 178-179).

The assumption in this essay, then, is that confessional poetry is a narrative construction of self in language. As Polkinghorne, quoting Stephen Crites, states: “The self is a kind of aesthetic construct, recollected in and with the life of experience in narrative fashion” (106). In addition, the narrative construction of self is rhetorical in the sense that those narratives have to be “convincing,” both to self and others, to be successful (Polkinghorne 119-121). Thus, the narrative selves created in confessional poetry (and therapy) also can be seen as rhetorical constructs, *ethoi* that seek to persuade both writer and reader (or patient and therapist) of the *validity* and veracity of its narrative construction. Walter Fisher understands narrative validity as the “probability” or coherence of the narrative (which he further divides into “argumentative coherence,” or structural integrity; “material coherence,” or completeness when compared to other stories; “characterological coherence,” or the reliability of the narrator and characters); and veracity as the “fidelity” or accuracy of the separate components of the narrative as assertions about social reality (47; 105). Both the probability and fidelity of the narrative configuration of experience and self can be understood to create the “ethical appeal” in confessional poetry that is necessary for persuasion and thus healing.

Poet as Analysand and Analyst

Having explored a little the nature of self as narrative construct and its relationship to *ethos*, let’s look at the nature of the narrative self created in Jim Flosdorf’s poetry, and in confessional poetry in general. Again, this will not be a critique of the poetry *per se* (though it may sometimes sound like it), but a rhetorical analysis of the narrative configuration of self in these poems, and an evaluation of the persuasiveness of that self, its *ethos*. Based on this analysis, I will then speculate on the success or failure of confessional poetry as therapy in Jim’s poetry, and its value in the rhetorical construction of identity. For clearly, in exploring his own past through poetry, Jim, like other confessional poets, is attempting to explain the tragic events in his life by constructing a story of it in a poetry that through its “ethical appeal” will persuade him (and us) of the probability and fidelity of the narrative experience, and thus of his self-identity as well.

In Jim’s poems, as in most confessional poetry, the *ethos* that is created is one of the poet as suffering artist. In the very first poem, “Long Enough,” the poet writes: “I must dip my pen/in that pool which never congealed/and write.” Indeed, one of the most prominent narratives that the confessional poet employs is the narrative romance of the suffering artist—both as victim and as hero, engaged in a mythic, archetypal battle for salvation and self. Perhaps the most interesting things about “confessional” poetry are not the lurid detail of the poet’s life but the poet’s attempts to create a coherent and convincing life-story by turning to the myths of narrative romance. As Polkinghorne explains, “People borrow aspects of their self stories from fictive narratives and

dramas. . . . Cultures do provide specific types of plots for adoption by its members in their configurations of self. These plot outlines are carried and transmitted in the culture by mythic stories and fairy tales, by tales of heroes, and by dramatic constructions” (153).

According to the late Northrop Frye, the element that distinguishes narrative romance from other forms of narrative, the one that Frye claims underlies most rituals and myth in Western literature, religion, and culture, is the theme of the hero’s quest, the adventure or journey through which prosperity and order are restored to community or hero in decline. For Joseph Campbell, the stages of the quest also represent “rites of passage: *separation—initiation—return*”; the hero’s perilous journey into a mythical underworld and the series of trials he must undergo result in the discovery of creative energy necessary for spiritual salvation and psychological wholeness, as well as prosperity (30-46). If the hero succeeds, reappears, and is reunited with his community, says Frye, we have comedy or romance; if he loses, or does not reappear, we have tragedy or irony.

The narrative selves constructed in Jim’s poetry more or less follow the lines of narrative romance described by the late Northrop Frye and Joseph Campbell. According to Frye, the world of narrative romance tends to be idealized: the story is usually set in nature, for example, in a dark enchanted wood. In addition, Frye remarks that the hero of narrative romance tends to be a “stylized figure,” a “psychological archetype” (304), one who possesses great mystery, virtue, power. Thus, in “My Grandfather’s Basement,” the poet as small boy “Like a sorcerer’s apprentice/stand[s] in awe of the mysteries performed in this magical place.” Set against these mysteries is the *ethos* of the present poet who once knew happiness, but now knows only sorrow. But the first thing that one notices about Jim’s work is the title of the larger prose narrative in which the poems are embedded: “My Father Was Shiva.” As the title indicates, the focus of Jim’s personal conflict, the cause of his suffering, and the subject of most of these poems, is his relationship with his father—here represented and understood in terms of the myth of the Hindu god of creation and destruction.

Indeed, according to Campbell, one of the central conflicts in the mythic hero’s quest is in the preparatory stage that Campbell calls “Atonement with Father” (126-149). In this early stage of the quest, the idolatry and fear of the all-powerful father figure must be surpassed, the immature self transcended, and the hero finally become reconciled with the father in order for the hero to release pent-up psychic energy and realize the full power and potential necessary for the quest. It is against the myth of the father as both creative and destructive force, relayed to us in the surrounding prose narrative, that all the poems are meant to be read: how Jim’s father, a famous scientist, invented the freeze-dry method but didn’t win the Nobel Prize, became embittered, alcoholic, and abusive; eventually sold out by helping the government apply his freeze-dry method to germ warfare; and finally took his wife’s and his own life in a last fatal outburst of emotion.

In the second poem in the article, appropriately entitled “Heroes,” the confessional again becomes mythical as Jim explores his contradictory feelings for his father as real hero “who dove twice into the muddy depths” to save a boy’s life but failed to save the boy’s father. This archetypal story of the hero descending into the underworld triggers by association the story in the second stanza of an

Indian boy who saved a fisherman from drowning by getting help. However, aside from the transference of heroic powers from the man-father to the boy, something else happens here, something that is central to understanding part of the “narrative problem” in Jim’s poetry as he attempts to account for the past and create a narrative self.

In the story, the fisherman gives the Indian boy *carte blanche* to his house, boat, bar. But the boy, “fat alcoholic bum, left family, left all.” It’s as if along with heroic powers, the weakness of the man-father was transferred to the boy in the poem. Having found a parallel mythic story that embodies his own in a kind of objective correlative, the poet is locked into the narrative of that story, unable to transcend his own narrative through it, and so falls back to the harsh reality of his own life. The poem ends: “My father was another—/came to no good end.” The mythic quest fails. Instead of comedy or romance we have tragedy and irony. The *ethos* of the artist as a victimized son, suffering at the hands of an insensitive, abusive man, is both created and *maintained*.

It would seem from this poem that Jim is unable to “surpass the idolatry and fear of the father,” atone, transcend. If this were the case in just this poem, we could probably dismiss it as poetic license. However, in poem after poem, Jim repeatedly fails to favorably present, alter, or understand his relationship with his father. And the trace of the tragic pattern of narrative romance—the “rise and fall” that is contained in the content and mirrored in the movement of many of these poems, from the personal to the mythic and back again—sets up and establishes the negative life story of the poet, creates the *ethos* of suffering as a persuasive element in almost all of these poems. For example, in “Waiting,” we have the mythical slaying of the all-powerful father, here embodied in the figure of the ogre. Set up by the conditional “when” at the beginning of the poem, neither the ogre nor the slaying ever comes. Rather than the necessary “atonement with Father,” the poet, like the ogre-father “shouts in the middle of the night/to vent his latest rage,” not as seer, but as monster. The negative identification that we see in these poems is the closest we come to any kind of reconciliation between father and son.

If according to Frye and Campbell the goal of the quest in narrative romance is the return of the hero and ultimately his/her reunification with others, the poems “fail” in this regard as well. In “Your Eyes,” for example, the poet as savant looks into “eyes that had seen something/something unspeakable.” One gathers from the context of the larger narrative that Jim is talking here about his mother’s father, who was a minister and obviously someone Jim looked up to, admired, identified with. But even in this poem, in which the poet shares the tragic grief and vision of this prophetic figure, the quest ends in failure: “I felt that image/deep behind the circles of your eyes/knowing I could never ask/knowing only that/I could only answer/your tears rising/with mine/also.” Though the poet and the prophet cry together about what has transpired, they do so separately, alone, in an impossible meeting of the minds, in a “negative communion” that are only emphasized by the isolation of the word “also” in the last line. But unlike Walt Whitman, whose poetic style the verbal gesture of anastrophe in the last line is reminiscent, the poet in this poem cannot fully identify with the hero, cannot transcend to the unity of the one in the many, or even the unity of two.

In these poems, then, the poet remains isolated and alone, trapped in the fragments of an unredeemed self. The poet himself affirms this. In the poem “Stone” that immediately follows “Your Eyes,” he says “It hit me like a huge stone/Splitting off from primal consciousness. . . /And then subsided/subsided/almost. For the rock lies there/visible in the depths.” What primal stone, what archetype hit him, we may ask? Set off in the right-hand margin of the page is the answer: “Why fear death/For death is no more/Alone/Than life.” And in “The Unburied Child,” the child that begins to rise is not the Christ of resurrection, redeemed by his omnipotent father and come back to save the world, but a perverted child who “learns to howl.” There is no communion here either. In this romantic myth, the suffering artist meets life and death alone in order to write about them (Alvarez). Even the last poem, “Lightening,” in which the poet does seem to find some solace and consolation in nature, and which many would regard as a positive sign, can be read as a negative development. While the poet does “lighten” as the branches of “the great pine” from which he removes stones and fallen trees toppled in a May storm “spring back,” the storm brews beneath the surface of this narrative, and the lightning still flashes in the double entendre of the title. Indeed, the rhetorical “return to nature” itself can be regarded as just another part of the myth of narrative romance (Fyre; Marx), in this case, the ironic pattern of narrative romance. In Jim’s poems, there is no reconciliation of the sons’ hostile feelings for the dead father through his communion with nature; the artist is ultimately unredeemed, alone in nature, alienated from others and from himself, unable to successfully return and be reunited with community—unable to complete the quest.

Thus, alone, vulnerable, unarmed except for his pen, in “I know some,” the poet confesses to the poem itself: “But poem/I confess to you/Midas's secret/I'll whisper in a hole/and bury it.” Here, the poet, like Midas, turns everything he touches to gold and so destroys it. (Do we detect a hint of guilt here? We are told in the prose narrative that Jim taunted his father about his failings, despised his father even as a boy.) Even to his poem the poet says: “Speak softly/whispering grains/of twenty-three year’s of growth/lest the wind/turn gossip.” For like other confessional poets, such as Lowell and Berryman [Simpson 144], Jim doesn’t want to talk about his father’s death, yet must tell, at least in his poems—must keep trying in order to construct a self, even if it is a negative self, must keep trying to give his life meaning, even if it is the meaning created only by the writing of poems themselves.

But given the insistent movement from personal to mythic and back again, it almost seems as if Jim cannot create a persuasive narrative, even for himself. Indeed, given the number of myths Jim draws on in these poems taken as a whole, Jim seems to be sifting through the stories of narrative romance, shifting from one to another, as if the stories themselves were not convincing enough, as if Jim cannot find a satisfying narrative that will somehow explain the events of his life, make his own story complete, meaningful, coherent. In the concluding section of Jim’s prose narrative, which consists entirely of poems, we have titles like “Through the Glass Darkly,” “The Beast,” “Taurus,” “Chest of Skulls,” “Like Parsifal,” “At the Flood.” These titles reflect the range of Jim’s searching, and the number of myths and tales he is willing to employ to find his own self/story.

But of course, the most prominent myth, the one to which all these ultimately refer, is that of the relationship of father and son. It is interesting and I think significant, however, that these poems about Jim's father are not the best. Indeed, in many (but not all) of the poems, it is when Jim moves from personal detail to mythic allusion that the poem "fails" to be convincing as narrative—fails, to use Fisher's terms, not on the grounds of argumentative or material coherence, but on the grounds of "characterological coherence"—which in confessional poetry is *ethos* itself! Take, for example, a poem like "Thinking About My Father." Section ii asks a question that is simple, beautiful, and believable in its figurality: "Oh, to have now/what it would have been like—/he and I on either end/of a two-man saw."

But in seeking the answer, the poet attempts to transcend the absence of his father in "real" life and achieve some kind of narrative coherence and completeness by invoking the mythic relationship between Telemachus and Odysseus. In Section iv, our modern Telemachus sings: "Sing me a song oh father/of your grief beyond the grave/Sing me a song oh father/of your grief before you made me/Sing me a song oh father/of your grief since then/Sing me a song that I may sail/past the evil I have done." One cannot help but note here the steady decline in the rhetorical power of the lines brought about by the increasing use of clichés that fail to become archetypal probes (McLuhan), that pull the poem down under the fictive weight of their narrative borrowing. And just as the character of the narrative fails to persuade as *ethos*, the poet has not been able to transcend his own narrative either. "The intimate puzzle/remains—/and so Odysseus longed/to visit Hades." Unable to "return home" himself, to complete the narrative of his own life, the poet identifies only with the tragic, suffering figure of Odysseus *before* he successfully completed his long quest.

It is significant that the mythic characterization of self is the weakest part of these poems. For as Polkinghorne argues, "The recognition that humans use narrative structures as ways to organize the events of their lives and to provide a scheme for their own self-identity is of importance for the practice of psychotherapy and for personal change" (Polkinghorne 178). But in order for the new narrative configuration of self to lead to personal change, it must be "rhetorically" convincing as narrative! This would seem to be true, whether the story is given in therapy where the patient must convince him/herself as well as the therapist, or in confessional poetry where the poet must convince him/herself as well as the reader. As Jim states at the end of "Long Enough," the goal of these poems is to "move on." But if Jim tries to use the mythic characters of narrative romance to validate and complete his own "narrative identity," those mythic characters instead tend to rhetorically undermine it.

A Psycho-Rhetorical Interpretation

Given the fact that the narrative configurations of self in these poems as *ethoi* are unconvincing, I want to ask a question that may be even more important than the persuasiveness of the poems themselves (though most poets probably would deny that). That question is: Are the narrative configurations of self in these confessional poems therapeutic? Does the writing of confessional poems succeed as therapy? Of course I won't be able to say whether the writing of confessional

poetry is therapeutic “in all situations,” in “every case.” But an evaluation of its success or failure in Jim’s poetry may shed light on some of the issues concerning the therapeutic value of confessional poetry (and confession) in general.

We have already seen how Jim’s poems move from the personal to the mythic and back again, and how Jim shifts from one mythic configuration of self to another, as if he is unable to find or sustain a healing vision in his poetry. Thus, it would seem that Jim’s attempt to construct, through the tragic myths of narrative romance, a therapeutic self-narrative that transcends his current conception of himself, sometimes succeeds as poetry, but seems to fail as therapy. As Jim says in “Styrofoam”: “I cannot throw up nor exorcise/what it is that boils below/but chip away with little words/such little, little words.” Jim suggests perhaps one reason why his self-narrative is “unconvincing” in one of the last poems in the set: there is “no myth dark enough/to suffice” (“No Myth Dark Enough”). But to accept this is to buy into the very myth Jim is creating in his narrative. Just as a therapist seeks to interpret the cause of the patient’s story, we must now seek the cause of the *rhetorical* failure of Jim’s self-contained, self-justifying narrative.

To do so I must briefly turn to the insightful analysis and expert opinion of Dr. Reuven Bar-Lavav, a medical psychiatrist who wrote a “Commentary” for Jim’s original article of the same title in *Voices*. If the psychological goal of Jim’s poetry is to transform his hostile understanding of his dead scientist father into an accepting and even loving one (58) and so reconcile his relationship with his father and himself through narration in psychologically satisfying terms, it is obvious from the poetry that Jim has not done so. “My father chewed hemlock and lead/and blasted the top of his brains—/from too much fame, leaped and crashed” (“To one whose father is dying”). As Bar-Lavav points out in his discussion of Jim’s use of his father’s book on the freeze-dry method, despite Jim’s perception that his father was a violent man responsible for the development of germ warfare—a “long-held view of Father as killer. . . confirmed in the latter’s own writings”—there is “no confirmation of the son’s old suspicions. . . in the quoted passages” (56).

Indeed, Jim continues to understand his relationship with his long dead father in same narrative terms, continues to feel the same intense fear and anger and hatred that he felt as a child. In “Children,” where the father “throws lightning bolts around like Jove,” the poet as a boy, like “Salome with John the Baptist . . . /put my father on a plate/and carved him like a roast,/with an apple in his mouth.” Jim persists in imagining himself to be the slayer of the mythic father; but the emotional ambivalence of the myth perhaps reveals (and conceals) the poet’s repressed anger and feelings of loss and guilt. As Ben-Lavav comments, “the son continues to see his father unrealistically, with harsh and unforgiving eyes. . . . The father’s real despair and loneliness are completely overlooked by the grown son who still is unsympathetic, and who taunted the father even while a youngster. The passage of time has not done much to change the son’s old but unproven and apparently baseless suspicions. . . [;] nothing in the story confirms these questionable ideas” (56-57).

Despite Bar-Lavav's initial statement, then, that "here is a piece of writing that leads to self-healing," there is no evidence in these poems that healing is taking place. Although we must at present accept Bar-Lavav's claim that "the heavy burdens of guilt and self-blame are all lessened as the tragedy is exposed to the light of day"—a claim that is the foundation of both confession and psychoanalysis—we must question his conclusion, at least as far as confessional poetry is concerned, that "such is the power of reality. It always helps in separating the self from its internal tormentors" (56). For what is this "reality" except another narrative construct by which we poor humans attempt to make sense of ourselves and the world and persuade others of them. As Bar-Lavav concludes, "Neither the writer nor we will ever know what really happened in that tragic relationship between the parents, but an altogether different scenario is possible, and much more likely" (56).

Thus, Jim's narrative perhaps fails not only on Fisher's grounds of "characterology" but on "fidelity" as well. We will never really know. But if the purpose of self-narrative is not only to provide coherence, wholeness—identity—but also a story through which to personally grow, the failure to transcend the old narrative, to create a new one, is, as Bar-Lavav confirms a psychological fixation, but one which these confessional poems apparently have not cured. In fact, the narrative conception of self as *ethos* that is constructed in language allows us to understand what fixation means from a rhetorical perspective: it is the inability to transcend the current, unhealthy, and sometimes destructive understanding of one's life-story, and to supplement or replace it with another, healthier, more convincing one. (One naturally assumes with Quintilian, perhaps idealistically, that the most persuasive *ethos* will be the most "virtuous" one—in psychological terms the healthiest one, though in practice this may not necessarily be the case.)

This leads us back to the concept of *ethos*, not only as a persuasive element in discourse, but also one that always implies rhetorical choice of character within the constraints of the situation. Why does Jim, like so many confessional poets, choose the tragic stories of narrative romance, adopt the *ethos* of the suffering poet, as his own? The fact that in Jim's poetry the personal becomes mythical at every turn suggests that the poet has a need to understand and act out his life in other, mythic, archetypal terms. As Polkinghorne attests, "personal stories are always some version of the general cultural stock of stories about how life proceeds. As narrative forms, these stories draw together and configure the events of one's life into a coherent and basic theme" (107).

In this scenario, the writer doesn't have much choice, since the myths and archetypes through which we understand and configure experience, whether contained in the unconscious or transmitted by culture, are *a priori*. Based on his life-long study of archetypes, Carl Jung certainly would agree. So perhaps would Northrop Frye and Joseph Campbell. Polkinghorne would seem to concur with this view as well: "myths are devices to think with: not merely recountings of any particular tale, but ways of classifying and organizing reality. That is their point: they are not descriptions, but models for descriptions (or thinking), logical techniques for resolving basic antinomies in thought and social existence. . . . [M]yths think themselves through people, rather than the vice versa" (83).

However, there are other, more positive stories within narrative romance—within consciousness or culture—that the poet could have drawn on. There are, then, other reasons perhaps for poets choosing if not actively seeking the tragic mode of understanding in narrative romance. As Polkinghorne points out, “people undertake adventures in order to construct and maintain satisfactory life stories. . . . Narrative enrichment occurs when one retrospectively revises, selects, and orders past details in a way. . . that will serve as a justification for one's present condition and situation” (106). That is, whether people consciously choose their narrative myths or not, they construct stories to explain their life in exciting ways that allow them to accept and cope with its consequences—especially those parts of their life over which they appear to have no control.

In this regard, it is relatively well known that the *ethos* of the suffering artist provides a “script,” a narrative of existence, a kind of incentive, even a heuristic for writing that turns writing (and suffering) into an adventure. By adopting the *ethos* of the suffering artist, writers—particularly young writers—provide themselves not only with an identity and a subject matter to write about, but also with an emotional justification for the real suffering that results, and a reason to keep writing and working at an occupation that has much uncertainty and few rewards. While many writers do eventually outgrow this *ethos*, it is one that, for better or worse, at least confessional poets perhaps do not outgrow.

Another possible reason already hinted at as to why the poet chooses to use the pattern of narrative romance and *ethos* of the suffering artist derives from the notion of *ethos* itself as an element in discourse used to persuade an audience. In this rhetorical scenario, the poet can be understood to be drawing on myths and archetypes lodged deep in public culture and/or unconscious to induce the reader to participate in the writer's private experience, indeed, to make that participation possible. In addition, these culturally shared stories may supply for both writer and reader “narrative evidence” that might actually be missing in the poet's own life-story, creating a persuasive narrative that will convince the poet (if not the reader) of the veracity of the experience and the validity of the poem. And of course, the *ethos* of the suffering artist is in itself a powerful trope in our culture, one that can be traced all the way back to the Platonic notion of mantic madness (the poet touched by the gods—in Jim's poetry, by Shiva). It is also a trope in our culture that can be traced to our Judeo-Christian heritage, in which the *ethos* of suffering is strong.

Of course, there is also the real suffering of the artist. I will not rehearse here the controversy concerning the value and necessity of suffering for art, represented on the one hand by Edmund Wilson, who analyzes through a Sophocles play the image of the putrefying, despised, agonizing, lonely artist who must suffer; or on the other hand the view represented by Lionel Trilling, that neurosis and suffering actually hamper artistic creation, which demands emotional control and discipline, or to alter Wordsworth's phrase, neurosis “recollected in tranquility.” Nor will I renew the eternal debate between the “classical” and “romantic” views of art (Barzun). Those debates, while relevant, are not the point here. The point here is that many see *ethos* of the suffering artist contained in confessional poetry—indeed, the *ethos* that has come to define confessional poetry—as a heuristic for healing, and that whether consciously or unconsciously, by choice or by cultural hegemony, Jim

rhetorically has created through the pattern of narrative romance the ethos of the suffering writer as the narrative configuration of self in these poems. While Jim says he would like “the wound of this pain to close” (“To Earth”), in poem after poem he will not let it—and the gap of the wound is exposed for everyone to see.

I have suggested one reason why Jim’s narrative does not persuade to heal, why no personal growth is visible in the writing of these poems and the narrative that surrounds it: because Jim’s attempt to borrow heroes from narrative romance to identify with and create his own life-story is rhetorically unconvincing. But at the risk of oversimplification, one also should ask to what extent the myth of narrative romance and the *ethos* of the suffering artist themselves prevent Jim from creating a more explanatory narrative, a more compelling *ethos*? To what extent does the failure to transcend the old narrative and create a new one present a cause of the psychological fixation, rather than an effect of it? Is it possible that Jim as poet has become so persuaded by the mythic *ethos* of his or culture’s making (trapped in those tragic albeit unconvincing narrative configurations of self) that he is unable to alter the basic understanding of his own life-story? Could it be that Jim, and other confessional poets, are stuck in the social-epistemic reality of their own literary creations?

Je m’accuse

Jim is not the only poet for whom poetry fails to provide a transcendent narrative, whose self remains fixated within the confessional configuration of a mythic self.

I was fifteen when I found my mother on the garage floor behind the lawnmower. I was supposed to cut the neighbor's grass. It was the last day of school. I called the police. I called my father. I kept my sister away from the garage door I had opened. I kept my cool, but it's all big blue blur, and I may have been frantic. The police arrived; my father came rushing home. Although I did not know it then, my mother was dead of carbon monoxide poisoning. That morning was the first time I had spoken to her in a month because she wouldn't let me play with my best friend, Dave. (I think they thought he was “a homosexual,” since he was the only friend with whom I played.) Before I left for school that day, my first and last words to my mother in over a month were: “good bye.” Little did I know it was for eternity. She was thirty-four years old.

Wrinkled and young,
she dwells in a chair,
waiting, patient,
content to be there.

A smile lingers,
her eyes flow;
she's been dead
but no one knows.

My sister and I were taken to a neighbor's house across the street, kept away while the police did their work. Accidental death, they called it. She still had her pajamas on, though it had been mid-afternoon. She had been listening to the car radio with the garage door closed and the car running and had succumbed to the fumes before she could completely climb out of the open car door. From what I remember, she was naive and crazy enough to do something like that. And there were clothes in the dryer: My aunt, who now lived in Texas and who was one of my mother's favorite people in the world, was in town, and my mother apparently was getting ready to visit her, waiting for her clothes to dry in the dryer in the basement attached to the garage when the "accident" occurred. She had reason to live, they said. And she loved music. Now she was lying on her back, on the cold concrete floor, eyes glazed, opened wide, one foot hanging on the edge of the car floor, an arm still reaching into the air—for air, for something to hold on to—in a frozen gesture of terror and helplessness. The car had finally run out of gas.

After Life: The Last 2 10 Minutes of Death

To my mother

(whom I found dead in the garage of asphyxiation, June, 1968.)

Dead, your dying brain
 yields its last feverish content
 before your upturned, inverted eyes
 watching a rerun of your life
 like a bad drive-in home movie
 against the garage wall
 where you lay, a newly conscious corpse,
 spellbound in the darkness,
 breathless, mouth open in astonishment,
 one leg hanging onto car seat,
 each flickering cell of film
 releasing what has been
 kept and collected
 in the dark wet corners
 of experience, heaped amid the dim
 confused clutter of a mind
 that is you, now drying, dying
 in that slow light,
 arm outstretched, hanging in the air,
 the final gesture and judgment of your life—
 the last two to ten minutes, memory
 a jar of thick liquid
 overturned on the cold concrete floor,
 spilling in a flash

But I've always believed it was suicide. It's a more satisfying story. It's even more tragic. I'm pretty sure my father wanted one more child. One night I think I heard them arguing about whether to have another child or not over a baseball game they had turned up on the radio in the bedroom. (I think they turned the radio on whenever they made love.) I also think my mother did not want another child. She had some kind of trouble with me in pregnancy (I suspect she didn't even want me, starved me by not eating so that she could stay thin as long as possible). She had a nervous breakdown after my sister was born, and had to be institutionalized for a while. I remember quiet green walls. But most importantly, she was beautiful, and fiercely fought growing old. She had always been horrified by the prospect of aging, appalled at the approach of disfigurement. She was very neurotic—especially about her figure. (I'll never forget her using leg make-up in a roll-on stick to hide any varicose veins, or how in her pajamas she slapped and firmed her chin all day, every day.) I've even heard that when she was pregnant with me, she didn't begin to show until the ninth month; I've interpreted this as the cause of my stomach problems—my upside-down stomach at birth; my nervous, thin, and sickly childhood; my bleeding ulcer that began in my teens and almost killed me three times—to blame her for starving me in the womb.

One night shortly before her death, I think I heard them doing it in bed. My mother suddenly emerged from the bedroom and stood naked before me. (This could have been another time.) She freaked out. (She always freaked when I saw her naked.) But what about the note my grandmother (my father's mother) told me about a year later but my father denied existed: "Mars, please don't come tonight." Was Mars a man or a supernatural god? My father was the man who, when I was allowed back in the house after an ambulance took my mother away and I asked "Is Ma going to be all right?", shouted in my face in front of the neighbors and relatives and friends who gathered in the house that was no longer my own: "She's dead, you fucking jerk!" (When Nana [my mother's mother] was told about her daughter's death, she started screaming that my father had murdered her. I think she still believes that to this day.)

After my mother died, my father let me play with Dave as much as I wanted. My father told me I had just become an adult—at fifteen. And he started dating almost immediately, it seemed, totally abandoned us; in fact, looking back on it now, he was downright desperate, driven both by emotional/physical need and perhaps some kind of guilt (at his own culpability, because he wanted a child?—not about leaving my sister and me alone), and we were left to cook and fend for ourselves while he attempted to secure a wife for himself and a mother for us. . . . At least this is what he told us. One night I got hit by a car on my bike. One evening I was raped by the electrician. One day the apartment was broken into and we were robbed. He never knew. And I hated all the women he brought home or took us to meet at divorced or widowed parents' picnics, rejected and resisted every one of them. I would not give up my mother for anything. The following poem was transcribed, almost "literally," from a dream I had during this period:

Aubade: A Dream

After years
 she woke in love
 his family gathered
 in a ghostly hall
 laughed at his will
 to leave he heard
 he heard them mock
 in grief through a
 small door ajar
 slight she came
 and spoke in shadows
 fingers whispering
 in his hair
 he wrapped his
 about her neck
 face he struck against
 picture of her
 and father wed
 shifting on the wall
 a voice that voice
 “your mother’s dead
 you fucking jerk”

Is this poem about the guilt I felt about my mother’s death? Emerging in relation to my own need for love? As another betrayal of my mother? Is it about my unsuccessful attempts as a teenager to have a relationship (several girls told me they *didn’t* want to be my mother)? Or is it about my father’s tense search to find a new wife I would never accept? And his anger? I know he yelled (I think); is this what he said? In my dream, as I remember it, the wedding picture of my mother and father that hung over the television in the living room of that house shifted, and the new woman appeared and spoke in the terrifying voice of my new stepmother—years before I met her. . . . This is the first time I have actively tried to interpret this poem, written many years ago, the first time I have written a non-fictional account of these “events.” You see my narrative need and explication created right before your eyes.

Yet, even as I write this, I sense a general uncertainty about the truth of even the basic account, never mind the interpretation of the poem. Perhaps this is a convenient narrative myth I tell myself to explain or satisfy something else I have not even begun to comprehend. Perhaps it is a rationalization forced upon me by my psychological desire both to reconfigure and repress, as well as the pressures, requirements, and constraints of the art form itself—the desire to write a unified poem, and thus the need to fictionalize details and events under the rubric of poetic license, fictions

which then will be believed because of the need to, as well as any little persuasive power the poems themselves might possess. (It is perhaps significant that what I consider to be my most powerful explanatory poems about my mother have the least ambiguity. Perhaps this is one problem with confessional poetry as poetry: in the attempt to fix events, to create a definitive self, the confessional poet perforce must eliminate the very ambiguity that would give the poem persuasive power?) Despite the fact that metaphors underlie our thought and may provide epistemic access to unknown or untestable experience (Boyd), metaphors also can conceal as much as they reveal (Lakoff and Johnson). And so perhaps the narrative attempt here to persuasively configure events in a way that will help me understand those events is a psychological failure as well.

I started writing poetry while in high school in response to my mother's death—at least that's what I've told myself, but there were several other reasons and people involved—a couple of years and a badly bleeding ulcer after the event that changed my life forever. Although I would not call myself a confessional poet, I have written other poems about my mother's death and poems about my relationship with my father that I'm too embarrassed to publish—even here, in the interest of psychological examination. I suppose one reason I started writing poetry was to get somebody, anybody, to notice the pain I endured for the dead mother who lives on in the mythic chair of my memory. And it did. In high school and college, my narrative wove and won me many teachers and friends, and helped create and cultivate the dark *ethos* that brought me some comfort, but totally defined who I then was. It was a secure if depressing identity, one that would explain and allow me to live with, and even in some perverted sense “enjoy,” the deep-seated pain I continually felt, the dark hole in which I moved and lived. At least this is what I remember, how I interpret it now. But having analyzed and discussed Jim's work, I am now more aware than ever of how unsure I am about my narrative, about my memory and interpretation of those events, of “the truth” of the story that I tell myself and others of my mother's suicide and my finding her. I will never know *the truth*.

And yet this is my narrative, the terms in which I have understood and explained to myself and others the most profoundly tragic event in my life that created who I am. To this day, I still don't know which story is accurate—accidental death or suicide. I probably never will. I can't get my father to tell me anymore; my stepmother says I don't need to know. What are they hiding? More questions, more myths, more narrative seeds to define my identity. But whether they're accurate or not, like the ancient mariner I used to tell both versions of the story to everyone I met—as soon as I met them—as if the second story of the suicide explained, even justified the first one of accidental death—justified who I was because it was so much a part of my identity as a suffering poet, because I needed everyone to know what happened *to me*. (Besides, it was more dramatic, and hence persuasive that way.) I hope you don't mind me telling it to you. I do so not only for the little psychological interest it might hold, but also to reveal the underlying problem with confessional poetry as narrative reconstruction, and to illuminate the rhetorical problem with confession in general.

Whether we stand with Trilling or Wilson or both or neither, while the psychological is a source of poetry (though not necessarily good poetry), there is little *evidence* beyond the felt and anecdotal to

suggest that confessional poetry leads to *therapeutic* change. While confessional poetry does provide the poet with an *ethos* to live by, to be seen, heard, understood, judged (no small feat), it does not seem to encourage much personal growth. Indeed, most confessional poets seem to come to a bad end. Ann Sexton, sad, mentally ill, writing poetry under the direction of a psychiatrist (Sexton), committed suicide by taking an overdose of sleeping pills. John Berryman, consumed by disillusionment and guilt, jumped off a bridge in Minneapolis (Simpson). Sylvia Plath came too close to the edge she continually peered over and stuck her head in an oven too long, in what A. Alvarez (himself a suicidal-attempted poet) considers to be an accident, an artistic experiment with death gone wrong. Delmore Schwartz died of total dissolution and failure in some seedy hotel room in New York (Atlas). Robert Lowell, the founding father of the confessional school of poetry in the United States, was a manic depressive who had many nervous breakdowns and was in and out of institutions all his life (he died of a heart attack in a taxicab in New York City [Hamilton]). I wrote bad poetry about all of them. Like Sylvia Plath's attempted suicides, I have had three major bleeds since my mother's death (about ten years apart—another narrative story, another romantic myth, that I tell myself, have lived by?). But no one, not even the greats, appear to be immune.

Thus, as a form of therapy, the mythological narratives we construct from/for our suffering selves in confessional poetry do not really seem to help. Are they merely rationalizations of our pain, an attempt to create “illusions to live by”? In fact, we might ask whether the myths of narrative romance, the *ethos* of the suffering poet, or even the poems themselves, are used to *repress rather than reveal intense emotions*, and whether the narrative pattern of romance is the only heuristic of healing available? (After all, the myths of narrative romance also oppress women, lead us to war, betrayal, death.) While narrative romance helps the poet create a mythic self, provides an image to cope, sustain, live by, an *ethos* that justifies and persuades, it also perhaps provides the poet with a self-satisfying, self-indulgent narrative, one that doesn't encourage personal growth but rather stagnation, egoism, narcissism, masochism—and in some cases, death.

And if these narrative myths are archetypal, inherent in human thinking, one also could raise the question from the other end of the spectrum: if our pain (or the resymbolization of it) is archetypal, how could confessional poetry *ever* offer a means of healing at all? This leads to the question of the therapeutic value of clinical psychology and public confession in general. As Polkinghorne attests, “The telling of the story in itself is held to have therapeutic value, and sharing one's own narrative with others helps bring cohesion to the support group” (178). But is it merely the telling of the story, the resymbolization of experience in language, whether mythic or not, that begets the healing process? I have been arguing that the self is itself constituted in language, just as thought is. If Piaget, for example, can trace the stages of intellectual growth in language, perhaps there is some intrinsic relationship between language and personality as well.

However, while resymbolization is necessary for understanding and central to the act of “publicly” confessing, we must return to the notion of confession as a rhetorical transaction—as the construction of self as persuasive *ethos*. For the narrative conception of self is not changed merely by resymbolizing it; that resymbolization, that interpretation, can be based on misperception and

misunderstanding—on the wrong premises. There is no auto-self-correcting mechanism in confessional poetry or the human mind for subjective misinterpretation *other than perhaps the persuasiveness of the narrative as a rhetorical construction*. Thus, without “another” to respond to and guide interpretation—even of one’s personal life—as a *social* construction of knowledge according to narrative coherence and fidelity, the poet, like anybody else, can simply lose him or herself in narcissistic narratives, rather than discover a “new,” salubrious self. For as Polkinghorne admits, “Psychoanalysis is not merely listening to an analysand’s story. . . It is a dialogue through which the story is transformed” (179).

Thus, given the social dimension of therapy as a dialogue with others through which the rhetorical formation of a persuasive self takes place, it would appear that confessional poetry as self-therapy is not enough. And despite the tragic case of Ann Sexton and others, it appears that the intercession of “another”—whether priest, judge, critic, or therapist—is central in the act of confession as a social construction of self, in rhetorically guiding the articulation of a new narrative, in assisting with the birth of a new *ethos*, in validating a new self. If the use of narrative romance is a mere rationalization, perhaps it is the therapist’s job to help the patient/poet find another narrative pattern, another “ethical” model, to free them from their unhealthy repetitive patterns of their past understanding and behavior. And if the use of narrative romance is archetypal, perhaps it is “the therapist’s” job to look for other stories, other modes and patterns within the universal unconscious that will help the poet/patient “complete the quest,” to turn the patient’s tragedy into “comedy or romance.”

However, it also appears that the intervention of a therapist in the formation of a new narrative self is often not enough. Psychotherapy, like rhetoric, is an uncertain science, an art; given the complexity and intractability of human nature, we cannot always succeed in persuasion and/or healing. But ultimately, whether the use of narrative is archetypal or cultural, whether narrative is the cause or the result of the fixation, the role of narration in confessional poetry and in therapy, the role of language in healing, rests upon an epistemological belief in the power of language to access, configure, and transform not only thought but personality as well. Indeed, psychotherapy is based on that belief (Hobson). Thus, the whole enterprise of psychology as the rhetorical formation and guiding of (healthy) selves hinges on epistemological issues that have not been debated much in psychology or confessional poetry. These are issues that a rhetorical analysis of confessional poetry raise, issues that will have to be addressed in psychological, literary, and rhetorical communities before the question of the therapeutic value of confessional poetry, and the role of language in therapy generally, can be better understood.

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