

Introduction

Say you're walking down the street one day, and then suddenly there *I* am. Let's assume you don't know me—but when our eyes meet, mine light up with recognition. Now your mind is really racing: *do I know him? should I know him? where do I know him from?* After a moment, I speak: "You don't remember me, do you? That's alright. I find your absent-mindedness charming." (And, you know, I always have. . . .)

That first paragraph was full of *you*'s and *your*'s, but notice how different each one felt. The *you* who walked down the street was, at first, a mere cipher. (*Instructions: please solve for u.*) But then *I* came along and by some transitive law *you* grew more solid in response. Before long *you* and *I* were entangled, though it's still hard to tell in what kind of relationship. Confrontational or tender? Filled with love or condescension? Either way *your* trajectory is clear. At first you're an anonymous figure—more knowing than known—then my insistence slowly unmasks you.

Of course, this happens in any story: characters slowly take shape, and as they do their relationships ramify. But isn't it odd, in this case, that the "character" in question is you? What's changing, then, isn't your knowledge, but your acknowledgment that I might mean you (yes, *you*) when I say it—even here at my keyboard, behind this mute page; even ensconced in this silly little thought experiment; even, believe it or not, in the preamble to a scholarly book. This is how pronouns work: they don't refer, they attach. One moment they're notional; the next, you feel them stick.

This book tells the story of a new way of saying *I* (and meaning it) in postwar America. Ever since the rise of mass-produced text, we've taken a pretty limp *you* for granted and a pretty watery *I*. But at the middle of the twentieth century, America's *I*s focused more sharply than they ever had before. By dint of their newfound solidity, these *I*s grounded new identities, fueled new therapies, and inspired fresh

kinds of political action. They also offered—still offer—an inexhaustible quarry for artists, those modern masters of the art of confession.

The Breakthrough into Confession

Ah, the American Fifties: where it all began!

Well, not exactly. Because way back in 1886, Sigmund Freud saw a patient undergo what she called “the talking cure.” Placed in a hypnotic trance, this woman poured out her thoughts while her doctor mostly sat by in silence. This method (minus the hypnosis, of course) would become synonymous with psychoanalysis—and thus a pillar of confession in the West.

Mm, Freud: founder of discourse, father of confession!

If you must. But what really got the ball rolling back in 1782 was the release of Rousseau’s posthumous Confessions. This book offered no story of spiritual growth. It just chronicled a life in all its grimy detail—utterly worldly, unredeemed. If Jean-Jacques ever aspired to anything higher, it could only be this: the grace of exceptional candor.

Aha, Rousseau: modern man! Freudian subject *avant la lettre*, *extraordinaire—sans précédent!*

Mais, au contraire! Because way back in 1215, the Catholic clergy made Rousseaux of us all by requiring a new sacrament. From that time forward, on pain of eternal damnation, all Catholics would confess to a priest once yearly. This had been the custom in some places for centuries, but now it was the law across all Christendom. The world’s first (and, to date, its most interminable) analysis had begun.

Right, the Fourth Lateran Council, the moment everything—!

—and a millennium and a half before Rousseau’s were printed, St. Augustine composed his own Confessions, telling of his youth as a sinner and of his conversion to Christianity. Augustine confessed his sins (a shameful story on the page) but also “confessed” (professed) his faith, a holy act before God.

Oh, so it was Aug—!

—and Augustine himself merely belonged to a longstanding tradition of studied self-reflection. Many centuries before he was born, someone had carved a simple maxim into a temple at Delphi: γνῶθι σεαυτόν, “know thyself.” It didn’t yet say “. . . by confessing to someone else,” but it now feels inevitable that it should.

Uh, wait—

—and even he, you see, this simple carver, was more the last than the first of his species. For, back in the depths of time, in some fateful cave—ugg ugg! aroo aroo!—and humankind would never be the same!

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Studies of confession—even offhand remarks on the subject—must, by custom, begin with a few sweeping claims about CONFESSION IN THE WEST. No essay on personal poetry, no think-piece on memoir feels complete until someone has lit a candle at the shrine of St. Augustine. Having witnessed a few such acts of historical hand-waving, you could be forgiven for thinking that a council of thirteenth-century bishops—or was it an eighteenth-century philosopher?—made the debut of *The Real World* in 1992 a historical inevitability.

There is, however, a serious point to be made on this millennial scale. Our current culture of self-awareness, self-expression, and self-care rests on foundations laid long ago. We've risen to penthouse levels—millions of life stories high—so it's only natural if we've lost sight of the ground. If we could just get our heads out of the clouds, maybe we'd see that other foundations were poured—or were possible. As it is, we have trouble “imagin[ing a] self absent the imperative to scrutinize and . . . articulate it.”¹ In the famous words of Michel Foucault: “Western man has become a confessing animal.”²

Stories on this scale (*Western man!*) can take your breath away. They can also suck the air out of the room. They're not harmful in themselves, but they turn deadly when we use them not to explain new phenomena, but to explain them away. *There's nothing new under the sun. Just read your Augustine and Rousseau—your Wordsworth, your Sade, your Freud!* But here's the thing: midcentury Americans *had* read them—well, all right, maybe not Sade—and still they felt that they were witnessing something new. I want to start by taking this sense of newness seriously.

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Consider American poetry, which took a “confessional” turn around 1959—in April of that year, to be precise.

APRIL 1ST, NEWTON LOWER FALLS, MA—Anne Sexton, a little-known poet, declares herself “the most about to be published poet around.”³ Boy,

she's not kidding! Before ten weeks more can pass, she'll have poems out in *Harper's*, the *Hudson Review*, the *New Yorker*—the list goes on. She will write about her brushes with madness, about suicide attempts, about sex in (and beyond) the marriage bed. Pretty soon, she'll be known as the confessional poet *par excellence*.

APRIL 13TH, NEW YORK, NY—Knopf publishes W. D. Snodgrass's *Heart's Needle*, in which the poet deals frankly with his recent divorce and subsequent estrangement from his daughter. The book would gain national attention and go on to win the Pulitzer Prize in poetry.

APRIL 28TH, NEW YORK, NY—Farrar, Straus & Cudahy releases Robert Lowell's tell-all book *Life Studies*. In a series of memoirs—some in prose, some in verse—Lowell exposes his troubled youth and confesses to an ongoing struggle with mental illness. *Life Studies* flies off bookstore shelves and drugstore racks. It would go on to win the National Book Award.

This sudden swell of confession, rising and breaking as one, quickly pulled in other people, too. Emerging poets were caught in the undertow (see: Sylvia Plath), while established figures (Ginsberg, Berryman, Roethke, Rich, etc.) suddenly found that they were riding a wave. It turns out they'd been writing "confessional" poems for years already. Reviewing *Life Studies* for the *Nation*, M. L. Rosenthal dubbed this book "confessional," and the name stuck like tar. Many—though not Rosenthal—meant it as an insult, but the public didn't care. Pretty soon, confessional poetry was America's most popular genre of verse.

Telling this story of confession's sudden ascent, poets and critics reach for the same word again and again. This was a *breakthrough*—past formalism, past repression, past social restraint—into emotion, into experience, into the world. "A breakthrough back into life," Lowell famously called it.⁴ A "breakthrough into . . . very personal, emotional experience," Sylvia Plath chimed in.⁵ So overworked was this word that, pretty soon, a critic could roll her eyes and refer to that "famous 'breakthrough' that it is the custom to talk about."⁶ This supercilious tone about "confessional poetry" and its "breakthrough" has been available to critics ever

since. Take Laurence Lerner, for example, author of the 1987 essay “What Is Confessional Poetry?”: “Everyone knows who the confessional poets are,” Lerner begins, “Robert Lowell, Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath, plus a few other candidates.”⁷ *Everyone knows*, he says, but what he means is, *Everyone but me*. By the end of the essay, he has concluded that we grievously “overstate [the] newness” of this genre.⁸ Elizabeth Barrett Browning, the Romantic poets, William Shakespeare—heck, even “Sappho and Catullus . . . look like confessional poets” to him.⁹ “Confessional poetry,” in other words, is as old—or is practically the same thing—as poetry itself.

Other critics have rushed to the genre’s defense, but they find only the narrowest position defensible. Confessional poetry *was* new, Diane Middlebrook retorts in an essay pointedly titled, “What *Was* Confessional Poetry?”—but properly speaking, only a tiny group of poets belong in the genre. “This was thoroughly middle-class postwar art—produced by [a small number of] WASP writers”—by her reckoning, only Lowell, Sexton, Snodgrass, and Plath.¹⁰ Narrower still, only “certain poems” by these writers truly count as confessional, and all were published “between 1959–1966.”¹¹ Middlebrook’s careful historicism might seem totally opposed to Lerner’s wide-eyed genre essentialism, but these critics do agree on one thing: midcentury responses to the genre were overheated and uncritical, and therefore should not guide our thinking. Well, I disagree.

* * *

By way of analogy, compare the genre “reality TV.” Any scholar of that genre could pull a Lerner and tell you that *Cops* (1989–present), *An American Family* (1973), or *Candid Camera* (1948–present) did “reality TV” first. After a few drinks, you might even get them to say that TV *is* reality TV. Or else they could do the Middlebrook and argue that *The Real World* certainly counts as “reality TV,” but only the first four seasons—and later shows called “reality” belong, in fact, to another genre, which we really ought to name. But to a cultural historian, distinctions like these seem beside the point. If all of sudden a certain phrase is on everyone’s lips (*reality television*, *confessional poetry*), this alone is a fact worthy of our attention. If, in the process, these genres

slosh out of the containers we critics have built for them, then so be it. Genres, after all, aren't just categories-ideal in some theorist's or critic's taxonomy; they're also cultural events we undergo together. As surely as "reality TV" *happened* in the 1990s, "confessional poetry" belongs to the turn of the 1960s. And just as "reality TV" was defined backward—its features deduced from the shows of the 1990s and 2000s that popularized the term—so "confessional poetry" was a backformation from the personal poetry of Lowell & Co.

Such reverse definitions—no one's creation and everyone's property—might feel out of place in the scholarly realm, but they exist in the world whether we like it or not, and they exert their force on the things scholars study. Loose and baggy though they may be, they tightly shape how art is produced and received—across platforms and media, across continents and centuries. In this sense, Lerner's claim that Sappho and Catullus "look confessional" to him is an *example*—not a refutation—of that postwar formation called "confessional poetry." And the sudden insistence on a deep, unified history of confession in the West—this, too, is a product of the postwar culture of confessionalism. We see this happening right now with "reality TV"—not only in our growing desire to look backward at shows like *An American Family* or *Candid Camera*, but also in the way reality TV's formal features and ways of being are spilling over into film, scripted TV, politics, and everyday life.

"Confessional poetry" had precisely this kind of outsized impact. This genre soon became "the whipping boy of half of a dozen newer schools"—an effigy of what Gillian White calls "lyric shame."¹² When subsequent poets were caught *identifying* with their speakers, or when critics smelled too ripe a mode of *expression* in their poems, the poet had to kneel in repentance, or else stand in defiance—but always, now, one of the two. This wasn't the first time that poets had mixed art with life, but somehow the chemistry had changed. Art and life were now potassium and water: they never met but sparks went flying. If you want to understand the culture of confession this created, you can't afford to be a wet blanket. You must be ready to catch fire.

Rosenthal was ready. Reviewing *Life Studies*, he knew that personal poems had been published many, many times before—many of them dealing, as these did, with subjects that were, in their time, beyond the

pale—but he insisted that these latest poems were different somehow. They certainly *felt* different in the wake of modernist poetry, whose practitioners often preferred to keep their poems “impersonal.” And, in the heyday of New Criticism, with its principled insistence that poems should be autonomous from their authors, it surely must have *felt* bold to see such personal poems for what they were. But beyond *feeling* different, they also *were* different from the poems critics named as precedents. While it is true, Rosenthal concedes, that the Romantics “spoke directly of their emotions” in their poems, they also transformed these emotions posthaste into “cosmic equations and symbols” for something else. They hoped to lose their sorrows and their selves as quickly as possible “in the music of universal forlornness.”¹³ Midcentury poets, for their part, resisted such transformations—they protected themselves against such loss. Rebelling with equal force against the Romantic legacy and the modernist tradition, these poets chose *personality* as their second medium, alongside (or even, at times, above) the written word.¹⁴ The *I* they uttered would be an obdurate thing, gumming the works of transcendence, slowing the enrichment of life into literature.

Whether readers (then or now) approve of the genre, whether they even believe it exists, a generation of them could take the idea of “confessional poetry” for granted—and this alone is an important fact. But most readers weren’t simply *aware* of confessionalism; they were *thirsty* for what it had to offer. They didn’t wait around to see which poems the critics would deem properly “confessional.” Instead, they looked for confession everywhere. Restless and suspicious, these new readers could spot the least hint of fact, could sense the faintest whiff of abjection. Whether poets liked it or not, the rules had changed. Poetry had once been abstract until proven confessional; now it was the other way around.

* * *

Meanwhile, at the lower end of America’s cultural hierarchy, a similar change was afoot among comedians. Just like poets, they’d been saying *I* for ages already, but at midcentury they suddenly seemed to *mean* it. More than that, they seemed to mean it so intensely, they gave the lie to all those *I*’s that came before. No more vaudevillian acts done with



Figure I.1. Mort Sahl performs, newspaper nearby and magazine in hand. Photograph by Robert Vose. LOOK Magazine Photograph Collection, Library of Congress.

polished detachment—no more black-tie dress code or pat one-liners. They now performed in a loose, amateurish way, as if all they ever meant to do was just stand up and talk. (“Standup comedy” someone decided to call it circa 1954.)¹⁵ Rambling, mumbling, and jamming—they could improvise for hours around a few core “bits” of humor. That is, they



Figure I.2. Lenny Bruce performs from the transcript of his latest obscenity trial. Village Theater, New York, 1964. Photograph by Kai Shuman. Michael Ochs Collection, Getty Images.

would repeat set stories (I mean, who doesn't?) while also reacting to the audience—to the *world* as they found it. To prove their point, some carried newspapers (Mort Sahl) or live telephones (Lenny Bruce) onstage, but whatever the tool, they were up to the same thing: busting out of that spotlight and into the world, breaking out of persona and into a personal mode.

It was hardly inevitable that this change in style should lead to a preference for confessional content, but it quickly did.¹⁶ What better way, after all, to generate lots of new material—and material that you could deliver with an air of spontaneity—than to draw on your life? Before long, comedy, too, just like poetry, had become confessional until proven otherwise. “I was walking down the street the other day . . .,” says the comedian; “I wandered lonely as a cloud . . .,” the

poet muses—except we believe them now. We want to know which street. (“Hardly passionate Marlborough Street,” perhaps?)¹⁷ We wonder where the clown was wandering last and how he got so sad and lonely. (Drugs, divorce, obscenity trials?) We want—okay, maybe not the *whole* truth—but enough to make us feel that, in a pinch, we could figure it out for ourselves.

These new expectations changed art from both ends: production and reception. On the supply side, artists now instinctively reached for life matter. “Imagine a blind poet of today *not* writing on the subject of his dutiful sighted daughters reverentially scribbling so many thousands of pentameters,” Billy Collins recently quipped.¹⁸ This is not unimaginable; we have simply (as poets, as readers) been slower to imagine it. The poet’s life is just *there* now—so available, so ready to be reshaped (or read) into art. But even back when this wasn’t yet the case, when “confessionalism” was still a minor subgenre of poetry, it had already become a major mode for *receiving* all kinds of American art. *I’m not confessing!*, comics might cry in the fifties, but by the seventies they could only sigh, then meet their public halfway. “Audiences nowadays want to *know* their comedians,” Joan Rivers observed in 1971. “Can you please tell me one thing about Bob Hope? I mean, if you only listened to his material, would you *know* the man, could you tell for one second what he is all about? His comedy is another America, an America that is not coming back.”¹⁹ She was right: what had changed, more than art, was the audience’s desire. They wanted to *know*—not just their comedians—but their poets and politicians, their actors and news anchors, too.

And what they wanted, the mass media gamely supplied, creating in the process a newly *knowing* public. Even Laurence Lerner, in a rare moment of historical specificity, acknowledges the impact of this sudden shift. Shakespeare and Lowell may be equally “confessional” in Lerner’s eyes, but, of the two, only Lowell had a public ready to *receive* him that way. The readers of Shakespeare could only “guess at the esoteric facts” to which his sonnet might allude, Lerner concedes—not so, the readers of Lowell’s *Life Studies*. “In the 1590s, you would have to ask someone who knew someone who knew the poet. Today the higher journalism does this for you, and anyone can join the coterie.”²⁰ The age of confes-

sionalism, then—it's no coincidence—is also the heyday of broad-based cultural journalism. It is the age (in other words) of the mass coterie.

* * *

Other critics who noticed this shift gave it different names. Christopher Lasch, writing in 1979, warned Americans that they were assenting to a “culture of narcissism.” Driven by their “salacious” desire to *know* each other, they had settled for “mere self-disclosure” instead of demanding greater “insight into . . . historical forces.”²¹ (Yes, you’ve encountered Lasch’s spiritual heirs bemoaning performance art, talks shows, Facebook, etc.) Lionel Trilling, lecturing at Harvard in 1969, took a milder view of this cultural shift, though he agreed on its scale and significance. What we were witnessing, he declared, was nothing short of “the moral life in process of revising itself.”²² European and American lives had once been governed by an ethic of “sincerity”: *To thine own self be true!* Now they were subject to a “more strenuous moral” standard, “authenticity.” To be authentic, in Trilling’s sense, meant to accept “a more exigent conception of the self and of what being true to it” entails. It meant committing yourself to an epic quest inward, a “downward movement through all cultural superstructures to some place where all movement ends, and begins.”²³ This “downward movement” to a “more exigent self”—this was precisely the work that confession performed.

At its worst, this project of authenticity was deluded and destructive. As Trilling wryly observes, the “judgment may be passed upon our sincerity that it is not authentic,” but of course authenticity itself would suffer the same fate.²⁴ This “downward movement” can become a race to the bottom as you discard first one truth, then another, then another in an endless search for the *really* real. Meanwhile, you tighten your belt so the race can be run, starving anything that dares to extend beyond the confines of your own lonely brainpan. Maybe Christopher Lasch is right! If true value lies within, and if “cultural superstructures” can only threaten it, then where will this “downward movement” lead us if not toward narcissism and away from politics—away, indeed, from any form of communal life?

And yet: consider two signature acts of excavation that *fueled* politics and *created* community. In the late 1960s, “coming out” was the

gateway to gay politics; a few years later, “consciousness raising” fueled second-wave feminism. In each case, individuals were encouraged to tell their stories—but, in so doing, they joined a community and began to take action. When you put it this way, it sounds like a clever ploy: a quietist means to an activist end. But these confessional rituals didn’t just play on people’s narcissism in order to recruit new troops into old campaigns. Instead, these rituals pointed the way to new social theories and new ideas of what activism might entail.

Just as poets had grown wary of the rush away from life and toward “universal” resonance, so these activists found they wanted to postpone the moment when individuals were swallowed up in grand theories of progress and oppression. The goal of consciousness raising, said Vivian Gornick at the time, was “to theorize as well as to confess”—with these two actions caught in an endless feedback loop.²⁵ *The personal is political*, that was the cry—and social theories would have to change accordingly. Gay and feminist activists wanted a chorus of *I*, not some guy with a megaphone leading the crowd in chants of *We!* If these movements fell short—and they did, one by one—it was because some kinds of *I*’s (usually the ones coming from middle-class mouths on white faces) amplified each other and drowned out the rest. But even as these movements began to sputter or splinter, this ideal of a personal politics remained the gold standard. *The personal is political— . . . is the personal, is the political . . .*—both today and for the foreseeable future.

This path I’ve just beaten from art to politics is, of course, well-worn by the feet of others, but I swear I haven’t drifted this way by habit or from some sense of scholarly duty. When the topic is confession, a deep rut runs this way. It grabs your tires and yanks the wheel from your hands. That’s because confession is both a work and an act—an artistic form and a social function. So, it’s impossible to know just where art leaves off and real-world action begins. Return to Rosenthal’s review of *Life Studies* with this in mind, and you’ll notice just how *active* he found Lowell’s poems to be. *Life Studies*, he says, was clearly serving as “therapy” for Lowell, but the poet was also “denigrat[ing]” himself in these poems, doing “violence to himself” with their well-sharpened edge—and, along the way, he was using these poems to “discredit” his poor, dead father. But despite all the harm these poems were causing, they also managed to win “moment-by-moment victories over hysteria and self-concealment.”²⁶ Archibald Ma-

cLeish, in his poem “Ars Poetica,” had concluded that “A poem should not mean / But be.” Under the sign of confession, poets had changed their minds: a poem must not mean, not be, but *do*.

What Was Confession?

It’s easy to imagine why, confronted by poems like these, the word “confessional” sprang to Rosenthal’s mind—and why the term would ring true for a generation of readers. Lowell came from blue-blood Protestant stock, but was known as a sometime Catholic convert. He was also notorious for having served time in jail as a conscientious objector to World War II. And, at least among the literary set, his struggles with mental illness were also common knowledge. (Even as *Life Studies* was first being “read and reviewed,” the news of “Lowell’s latest crash was hissing around the poetry world,” Peter Davison recalls.)²⁷ In short, Lowell’s life was the theme of a thousand confessions—sacramental, legal, and therapeutic. To call his poetry “confessional” was to invoke all three facts at once—not separately or sequentially, but together. Lowell himself yoked the three together in a passage from *Life Studies* that Rosenthal quotes in his review:

I was a fire-breathing Catholic C.O.,
and made my manic statement,
telling off the state and president.²⁸

Entangling his Catholicism, his mania, and his felonious dissent—each shocking, no doubt, to the Lowells of Boston—Lowell (like Rosenthal) makes them the theme of a single confession. When the term “confessional” did stick to other poets, it was usually because they shared at least two of these three things with Lowell: a flirtation with the Catholic faith, an outlaw air (if not a felony record), and a prolonged, public struggle with mental illness. The term was diffuse, in other words, but also overdetermined, drawing together with one gesture all the tributaries to *Life Studies*’ torrent of scandal.

Rosenthal hardly invented this ambiguity in “confession”; he just revealed it and put it to use. In English, “confession” has long done the work of three words: describing a sacred profession of sin, a legal admission

of guilt, and an intimate revelation of shame. The German language, Rita Felski reminds us, has three distinct words for these acts (*Beichte*, *Geständnis*, and *Bekenntrnis*), but despite these linguistic resources, it was a German-speaking Austrian, Theodor Reik, who wrote the signature book on the unity of all confession.²⁹ Reik's *The Compulsion to Confess*—published in English the same year as *Life Studies*—gathers a dizzying array of religious, psychoanalytic, legal, artistic, and everyday behaviors under the rubric of confession. More than that, Reik suggests that all these acts of self-betrayal spring from the same psychic mechanism. Though ancient and buried deep, this drive is always surfacing in unexpected ways: *Geständniszwang*, the compulsion to confess. The ambiguity Rosenthal found in “confession,” then, lies not in the word, but in the act itself—and in the buried impulse that spurs on.

Confession, in this view, is no single behavior, nor even a set of related behaviors; it is a shape-shifting metaphor for a whole way of being in the world. After all, no sooner has Reik proposed the term, than he renders it a cipher, observing that confession proper (i.e., *Geständnis*) is “from an evolutionary point of view, the youngest function of this tendency.”³⁰ Subtracting the *Geständnis* from *Geständniszwang*, Reik renders compulsion itself (plain—*zwang*) the naked placeholder for this urge. So expansive does this theory become that, according to Reik, every psychoanalytic “symptom” can be traced to this compulsion—formerly-known-as-confession—from the neurotic’s “acting-out” to the “compulsory self-betrayal [of] blushing.”³¹

In his preface to the American edition of *The Compulsion to Confess*, publisher John Farrar offers the book to a “public interested in psychological literature”—and interested they were.³² This English edition of Reik’s work joined the burgeoning ranks of what I’ll call the American psycho-pop canon. Public interest was rising not only in psychoanalysis, but also in existentialism, in faux-confessional literature, and in the outlaw life-writing of the Beats. Bookstore ads from the period suggest the range of this canon, as well as Reik’s place of honor within it. An ad for the Marboro Book Club from late March 1959—i.e., on the eve of confessional poetry’s *mensis mirabilis*—invites the reader to “choose from a TREASURE OF ART MASTERPIECES—LOLITA—THE COMPULSION TO CONFESS—MASS CULTURE—and twelve other important books.” Among the other suggested books, you’ll find Sartre’s *Being and*

Nothingness, an anthology of *The Beat Generation and the Angry Young Men*, and a second Reik book (*Of Love and Lust*). A second ad, this one touting the psychology offerings at Brentano's Paperback Emporium circa 1966, features eight of Reik's works (including his autobiography, *Fragments of a Great Confession*) and gives him pride of place among such figures as Wilhelm Reich, Erich Fromm, Erik Erikson—even Jung and Freud. It is these works Farrar was probably imagining when he introduced *The Compulsion to Confess* as the perfect book for a “public interested in psychological literature,” but it is tempting to imagine that he was thinking of another book published under his imprint that year, “psychological literature” of a more literary bent: Lowell's *Life Studies*.

Lolita is a particularly apt companion for *Life Studies* and *The Compulsion to Confess*, and an excellent emblem of the psycho-pop canon generally. It begins, “‘Lolita, or the Confession of a White Widowed Male,’ such were the two titles under which the writer of the present note received the strange pages it perambulates.” “The writer of the present note” (the fictional John Ray, Jr., PhD) then describes the book we are about to read as a “remarkable memoir,” as the quasi-legal “confession” of a man awaiting trial, as a “confession [that] does not absolve [its author] from sins,” and as a “case history” bound to become “a classic in psychiatric circles.”³³ *Lolita*, in other words, proudly embodies midcentury America's heady conflation of all kinds of confession. Welcome to confessional America: your exit visa will not be approved.

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Their bookshelves filled with such words, their heads filled with such thoughts, the American public was primed for yet another national spectacle of confession: legal wars waged in American courts (including the court of public opinion) over the admissibility of confessions at trial. Having mostly done away with the rope and the rubber hose, judges were turning their attention to “subtler devices” of coercion.³⁴ After a decade of case-by-case appeals, the US Supreme Court decided to bring the issue to a head. “Once again,” Justice Felix Frankfurter sighs in the opening sentence of the majority opinion in *Culombe v. Connecticut* (1961),

the Court is confronted with the painful duty of sitting in judgment on a State's conviction . . . in order to determine whether the defendant's

confessions, decisive for the conviction, were admitted into evidence in accordance with the standards for admissibility demanded by the Due Process Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment.³⁵

Anxious to bring this barrage of appeals to an end, Frankfurter relied not primarily on the circumstances of this case—which were easily damning enough—but instead on a broader, philosophical argument about the nature of free will. *Voluntariness*, he argues, is an “amphibian.”³⁶ Neither a subject for psychology alone nor a mere question of legal procedure, it inhabits the shoreline between each person and the law. Shouldn’t this change how we decide whether a confession is voluntary? Chief Justice Warren began his concurring opinion in a tone of wry disapproval: “It has not been the custom of the Court . . . to write lengthy and abstract dissertations upon questions which are [not] presented by the record. . . .”³⁷ Five years later, though, Warren himself would pen one of the twentieth century’s most controversial “dissertations” on confession, the majority opinion in *Miranda v. Arizona*. In it, he argues that “the process of in-custody interrogation . . . contains inherently compelling pressures which work to undermine the individual’s will to resist and to compel him to speak.”³⁸ To depressurize this process, he proposed a warning (“You have the right to remain silent,” etc.), which was meant to be more practical than Frankfurter’s musings, though its implications were just as sweeping.

For all their differences, Warren and Frankfurter do agree on one thing: that a confession is not a mere document—not that bit of textual ephemera admitted into evidence at trial and available to higher courts via the record on appeal—but rather a performance that takes place in a home, on the street, in a squad car, or inside an interrogation room. Both justices, accordingly, replace the confession itself with a little drama of its production. Frankfurter constructs his along the lines of a well-made play, with rising action and a sudden climax. (“It is clear that this man’s will was broken Wednesday afternoon.”)³⁹ Warren, meanwhile, works in a more Pinteresque mode: it is the “atmosphere” that interests him—the “nature and setting of this in-custody interrogation.”⁴⁰ But the effect is the same: the lonely voice of a written confession gives way to a cacophony of voices; confessional authorship

gives way to confessional performance, filled (as all performances are) with rival acts of authorship and authorization. Here, for instance, is Frankfurter's account of how Culombe's confession arrived at its final form:

At about 8 p.m., [Officers] Rome, Paige, O'Brien and County Detective Matus brought Culombe to the interrogation room to reduce his several confessions to writing. Culombe made a number of statements. The manner of taking them (no doubt complicated by Culombe's . . . tendency to give rambling and non-consecutive answers) was as follows: Rome questioned Culombe; Culombe answered; Rome transposed the answer into narrative form; Culombe agreed to it; Rome dictated the phrase or sentence to O'Brien. Each completed statement was read to and signed by Culombe.⁴¹

The telling phrase here is: "to *reduce* his several confessions to writing." Just like Frankfurter, Warren wanted to reject *reductive* notions of confession and confessional authorship. To that end, from among 150 relevant appeals on his desk, he handpicked four filled with pre-confessions, written and oral.⁴² The result was the omnibus case known as *Miranda v. Arizona*, designed to probe the boundary between performance and writing—and to ask the insistent question, *Whose writing?* Confession, for these justices, was itself an "amphibian," shared between confessant and confessor, flitting from text to performance and back.

* * *

You can tell a lot about people from their choice of enemies: Chief Justice Warren found his nemesis in Fred Inbau, a midcentury expert in criminology and the author of best-selling interrogation manuals. "To obtain a confession," Warren writes, quoting Inbau, "the interrogator must 'patiently maneuver himself or his quarry into a position from which the desired objective may be attained.'"⁴³ But it wasn't just Inbau's predatory language that drew Warren to him. Inbau also made no bones about his desire to turn the subjective act of confession into an objective form of evidence. A leading proponent of the polygraph

machine (the so-called *lie detector*) Inbau had little patience for free will, “amphibious” or otherwise. In one particularly dystopian passage from his manual *Lie Detection and Criminal Interrogation*, Inbau dreams of a future where,

Since the physiological reactions obtained by the [polygraph], and even the “yes” and “no” answers are not used testimonially—that is, as “statements of fact to show their truth”—it well may be argued that there should be no legal obstacle to a compulsory examination of this nature. The situation in all essential respects may be considered analogous to that involved in cases in which an accused person is compelled . . . to give impressions of his fingerprints. . . .⁴⁴

Monitoring the bodily reflexes of criminal suspects—measuring their pulse, tracking their breathing, and measuring their sweat—the polygraph promised to convert this messy business of confession into a simpler form of authorship: three quivering arms with inked needles that wrote out the body’s guilt in longhand.

Treating the signs of a suspect’s anxiety as a legible form of “writing,” the polygraph collapsed the distance between matter and mind, body and text, object and subject. No wonder, then, that early accounts of this machine are so filled with metaphors of vivisection:

Nothing could have been more dramatic, more dispassionately heartless than the manner in which science dissected [the suspect], felt his heart beats, his pulse, examined his breathing, looked beneath the flesh for indications.⁴⁵

This unsettling imagery, echoed also in early descriptions of confessional poetry, captures the polygraph’s uncanny power.⁴⁶ Like vivisection, lie detection sounds the depths that confessional poetry and psychoanalysis probe only metaphorically. And, sounding these depths, the polygraph finds nothing but meat—throbbing, heaving, secreting—all the way through: a depth made entirely of surfaces. Like some inversion of the torture device in Franz Kafka’s “In the Penal Colony,” the polygraph works not on the assumption that our guilt must be carved into our flesh from without, but that it’s already written there from within.



Figure I.3. Fred Inbau performs a polygraph exam on film actress Betsy Palmer. Bettmann Archive, Getty Images.

In his dissent to *Miranda*, Justice Harlan seems baffled by Warren's impassioned attack on police interrogation, and he scoffs at the Chief Justice's hair-trigger sense of the accused's confessional urges.

It has never been suggested, until today, that such questioning was so coercive and accused persons so lacking in hardihood that the very first response to the very first question . . . must be conclusively presumed to be the product of an overborne will.⁴⁷

What Harlan didn't realize was that Warren was reading these confessions as if they were polygraph printouts. As a prosecutor in California's Alameda County in the 1920s and '30s, Warren had a front-row seat to the polygraph's debut as a bit of policing hardware, and he watched closely as the Berkeley police created software to match: that is, formal interrogation techniques.⁴⁸ This was—not figuratively, but quite literally—the same software Inbau was peddling in the 1950s and '60s in his interrogation manuals.⁴⁹ The “right to remain silent,” in short, was invented by a man who feared we might be incapable of exercising it.

Midcentury Americans agreed with Warren on this point—or, at least, they were fascinated by this horrible idea. Not only were members of the psycho-pop canon like Theodor Reik insisting that our confessions could erupt anywhere (and in any form), but this same anxious vision of our psychic fragility was central to America's Cold War mythos. Just think of all the overblown nightmares of communist brainwashing or mind control that filled American popular discourse, crystallized by Richard Condon in his 1959 best-seller *The Manchurian Candidate*. Stories like these made sense, in their exaggerated way, because Soviets, the Chinese, and other communists were thought to possess a psychic steeliness that Americans, nurtured in the warm embrace of capitalist democracy, could never attain.

So, in ways that both exhilarated and terrified Americans, “confession” described a breakdown in psychic boundaries: between voluntary and involuntary acts, between subjective and objective states, between private experience and public life. When Rosenthal reads the final poem in *Life Studies* as Lowell's “assertion that he cannot breathe without these confessions, however rank they may be,” he is spotting a new mode of confession in the offing: not just one that tries to purge us of whatever chokes our psyches or stifles our breath, but also one that, whether we like it or not, comes as naturally—and as continuously—as breathing in and out.⁵⁰ On the cusp of the epochal 1960s, Americans panted and gasped—now with confession on their breath.

Committing to Print, Promising Performance

What if we approached all life-work in this spirit? What if we tried to read confession after the manner of *Miranda*? Autobiography studies,

it turns out, is already full of legal metaphor, from the contract law of Philippe Lejeune's "autobiographical pact" to the widespread idea that a "law of genre" (as theorized by Jacques Derrida) is enforced with particular severity against life-writing.⁵¹ According to Paul de Man, the reader of autobiography "becomes the judge, the policing power in charge of verifying the *authenticity* of the signature and the consistency of the signer's behavior"; readers "become detectives," Leigh Gilmore adds.⁵² Neither de Man nor Gilmore quite approves of this stance, but they attribute it to the silent majority of readers. Casting the bad reader of autobiography as a policeman or trial judge, theorists of life-writing appoint themselves to the court of appeals. From that high bench, they assess our procedures—for granting authority, affirming authenticity, and inferring agency. What if we thought more explicitly of appellate judges as our peers, especially when they confront legal questions that border so nearly on our own—when, for instance, they consider our integrity before the law and the law's power to shape us?

* * *

Like the literary scholar, the appellate judge is conventionally limited to the textual record on appeal. But in deciding *Miranda*, Chief Justice Warren never settled for this hidebound position. Instead, he strained at the limits placed upon him—first, by the norms of appellate law and then by the secrecy of police procedures. The "privacy" of what Warren darkly calls "incommunicado" interrogation "results in . . . a gap in our knowledge as to what in fact goes on."⁵³ His solution was to wield text against text—e.g., interrogation manuals against confessions—sifting this expanded archive for traces of the confessional repertoire. Warren was, in this sense, a performance theorist of confession; scholars of autobiography should follow his lead.

Literary historians and theorists often ask us to imagine the moment when a panting confession gives way to an autobiography; when a narrative act, in other words, is finally committed—to print. Sometimes, they treat this moment as the turning point in some grand evolutionary narrative, as when James Olney describes "autobiography as a literary mode . . . emerging out of autobiography as a confessional act."⁵⁴ More often, though, critics aren't thinking of a particular moment. Instead, they're trying to account for a vague feeling readers get: that autobiography's

content rests uneasily in its form; or, in the words of Jeremy Tambling, that autobiography is simply “confession’s repressed form.”⁵⁵

This, we say, feeling the weight of a book in our hands or the flimsiness of a thin dossier, *is not a person, not a life*—and many theorists of life-writing positively revel in the feeling. They love the hyphen, that measurable gap between life and writing, and they wish life-writers would join them. Rita Felski, for instance, counsels confessional writers to avoid “the illusion of face-to-face intimacy,” and to embrace instead writing’s “play, ritual, and distance” from life.⁵⁶ Paul de Man likewise imagines autobiography as a “de-facement” that leaves the subject “eternally . . . condemned to muteness.”⁵⁷ But can’t we acknowledge that writing dislocates us from life without casting all life-work into the mute, faceless distance?

Diana Taylor, author of *The Archive and the Repertoire*, offers an alternative—the same one, it turns out, that Warren had discovered. “Instead of focusing on patterns of cultural expression in terms of texts or narratives,” Taylor writes, “we might think about them as scenarios that do not reduce . . . embodied practices to narrative description.”⁵⁸ These “scenarios” are much broader than any action or document to which they might, from time to time, give rise. They are vast “meaning-making paradigms that structure social environments, behaviors and potential outcomes.”⁵⁹ Just as Justice Frankfurter distrusted the interrogator’s habit of “reduc[ing]” a suspect’s “several confessions to writing,” so Taylor wants new approaches that “do not reduce” a performance to a text—nor to any archivable medium.

Following Taylor—but also Frankfurter and Warren—I suggest that we treat confession not merely as autobiography’s repressed content (and certainly not as its evolutionary precursor), but rather as the scenario that “structure[s the] social environments, behaviors and potential outcomes” of American life-work, including acts of life-writing. Felski and de Man, as well as other theorists working in the wake of critical theory, would surely agree: the displacement of writing from life is never simple. But it is also, I would add, never finished—and always able to be undone. Even after a self is committed to the page, the scenario of confession persists, ensnaring the texts of life-writing in a tangle of non-textual media and non-literary practices. “Confession,” then, is a much broader term than “autobiography” will ever be. The latter word—just

look at its suffix—begs the question of writing’s centrality to life-work. Confession, meanwhile, may pass through writing, but it inherits past practice and promises future performance.

* * *

These performances, when they arrive—in the form of poetry readings, performance art, “confession booth” monologues, etc.—may look like some of the simplest performances we have: one person, typically placed in an everyday space or against a neutral background, speaks directly to the audience. But, studied closely, these performances are not immediate; in fact, they betray an obsession with their own mediation. Confessional performers don’t just chronicle the events of their lives; they also dramatize the tension between their inchoate selves and the media they use to try to capture them. Confessionalism, then, amounts to a living critique of autobiography, which confessionalists understand as something stagnant and one-dimensional.

Scholars of autobiography, especially in the twenty-first century, should take this critique to heart. Even *life-writing* now circulates in ways that should boggle the simply “graphical” mind. This is especially true in the case of the serial confessant, a sort of celebrity who makes a living by performing act after act of life-work. Consider an extreme instance of the type: Cheryl Strayed, whose Oprah-anointed memoir *Wild* has been visible in every subway car and airport since it was first published in 2012. Long before she wrote *Wild*, Strayed had already produced a semi-autobiographical novel, several personal essays, and an unusually self-revealing advice column for *The Rumpus* called “Dear Sugar.” (This last, to complicate matters further, was later collected into a book, and has now been revived as a WBUR podcast.) And in the wake of *Wild*, Strayed did what any memoirist must now do: she kept confessing on talk shows, at readings, in webchats—wherever an audience was willing and waiting.⁶⁰ Faced with someone like Strayed, why would we fixate on the moment when this flow of confession coagulated into a book called *Wild*?⁶¹ For her—and, more and more, for all life-writers—committing your story to print means, quite literally, promising performance.

If Marshall McLuhan is right and Western cultures have become “post-typographic” in this age of mass media, this has not led—all

hand-wringing aside—to the death of text or print. (The memoir boom is evidence enough to the contrary.) Instead, media hierarchies are flattening—or, at least, the caste-lines have eroded—and we’ve grown savvier to what McLuhan once called the “interplay and ratio” of different media interacting.⁶² At midcentury, this kind of “interplay and ratio” among media was already many artists’ primary concern, and they tended to give this interplay the same name: performance. The poet Charles Olson, arguably the first person to say “postmodern” and mean not a fall from modernist grace but the birth of a new aesthetic, defined it by its habit of embracing “the active intellectual states, metaphor and performance.”⁶³ In typical whirlwind fashion, Olson barrels past this assertion, leaving “performance” a mere cipher, but we can see what he meant by simply looking at the art that inspired this line of thinking. In 1952 at Black Mountain College, Olson participated in what some call the very first “happening,” a collaboration with, among others, John Cage (bête noir of midcentury music), Robert Rauschenberg (in his White Paintings phase), and Merce Cunningham (refugee from the high modernist dance of Martha Graham).⁶⁴ Gathering in a theatrical venue, these artists set their work side by side with as little (and yet as much) integration as the two terms in any metaphor. Such collisions and flows among media—*this* is what performance was coming to mean.

What, after all, *is* the medium of performance? Phrased this way, it almost feels like a trick question. We might as well ask, *What color is plaid?* Performance can only be what several media do—together and to each other—in a live and tensile display. Why else has this word, over the past half-century, come to serve—not as a stand-alone noun, but as the first half of many compound phrases: performance art, performance poetry, “performance theater,” and so on?⁶⁵ In each case, “performance” unsettles its neighbor—sets it in motion. (In this sense, we might describe Cheryl Strayed and Earl Warren as two masters of “performance print.”) This isn’t exactly new: the theater has long been a meeting-ground for other arts—a “hypermedium,” as Chiel Kattenbelt calls it, “a medium that can contain all media.”⁶⁶ But at midcentury, this kind of hypermedial “performance” escaped the theater, and it soon pervaded American culture.

It shouldn’t surprise us that confessionalism emerged during this heyday of hypermedial “performance.” The confessional self, after all, is a complex thing—better conjured than represented, more triangu-

lated than found. The very “concept of mediation,” writes John Guillory, “expresses an evolving understanding of the world (or human society) as too complex to be grasped or perceived whole (that is immediately), even if such a totality is theoretically conceivable.”⁶⁷ For confessionalists, the self is exactly this sort of thing: sublimely elusive, but “theoretically conceivable”—and thus something to pursue through countless acts of mediation. *Here it is*, says the confessionalist, producing one poem, performing one bit, *but also here—and always elsewhere*. This pursuit may remind you of what Derrida calls *différance*, the endless deferral of full reference or meaning, but confessionalists never shared Derrida’s irony toward the task. Instead, as media theorists Jay Bolter and Richard Grusin observe in their discussion of “digital hypermedia,” confessionalists sought “the real by multiplying mediation so as to create a feeling of fullness, a satiety of experience which can be taken as reality.”⁶⁸ Call it magical thinking, if you will, or sleight of hand, but confessionalists always aspired to foster such feelings. They promised their public a *self*, and they never set out to make promises they couldn’t keep.

* * *

But in a mediated age, maybe the truth itself is nothing but a tissue of broken promises. Guillory again:

It would be difficult to imagine speaking without being able to revise one’s speech, to try to put one’s thoughts into more accurate or better language. The difference between what one means and what one says defines the mediation of words and sustains the enabling fiction that ideas exist. Or, to put this another way, the statement “no, that is not what I meant” is the necessary warrant for credibility in communication. . . .⁶⁹

Confessional selfhood, likewise an “enabling fiction,” is sustained not by identity, but by difference—the inevitable difference between what you are and what you confess. This difference does not mark confession as a failure; on the contrary, it is “the necessary warrant for [its] credibility.” *No, that is not what I meant*, the confessionalist says, and so the act of confession goes on. This makes the confessionalist quite different from Jean-Jacques Rousseau who, in the preface to his *Confessions*, plays out a peculiar fantasy:

Whenever the last trumpet shall sound, I will present myself before the sovereign judge with this book in my hand, and loudly proclaim, thus have I acted; these were my thoughts; such was I.⁷⁰

Monumental certainty, each book a perfect double for its author: this is something to which a confessionalist never aspires.

Perhaps this is why confessional poets produced, not autobiographical narratives exactly, but collections of life-vignettes. No other genre of American poetry is more strongly associated with the poem-cycle: John Berryman's *Dream Songs*; W. D. Snodgrass's *Heart's Needle*; Lowell's *Life Studies*, *Notebook*, *For Lizzie and Harriet*, and *The Dolphin*; Anne Sexton's long, segmented poem "The Double Image" and her books *All My Pretty Ones* and *Live or Die*. Confessional poetry came to the public not as a work, but as a network. The significance of any poem lay not in itself, but in its connections. It always deferred to a grander order—be it the poem-by-poem form of the cycle or the day-by-day progress of a poet's life. So, quite against the critical norms of its day, the confessional poem lacked all pretense to autonomy. Even these poets' resistance to formal metrics was just part of this general rejection of the poem's autonomy: "regularity [of form]," Lowell notes, "just seemed to ruin the honesty of sentiment, and became rhetorical; it said, 'I'm a poem.'"⁷¹ What he needed was a poem that would stop announcing its poesy to every stranger it met—maybe even one that stubbornly failed to become a poem in the first place, or else to remain one for long.

If this was the aspiration, then it oddly resembled the caricature drawn by some of confessional poetry's harshest critics. I'm thinking not only of the immediate outcry that this poetry was "anti-poetic," but also of the bizarre and enduring notion that a poem's poetics and its confessionalism are related not in the way that any other form-and-content pairing are, but as a kind of trade-off, in inverse proportion to one another.⁷² Laurence Lerner offers a particularly cutting version of this critique in his essay "What Is Confessional Poetry?" when he excoriates one deservedly obscure Lowell poem as "an instance where confessional poetry becomes, quite simply, confession."⁷³ Indeed, the poem digs up some details from Lowell's childhood and, with a barely stifled yawn, puts them on the public record. It feels less like a poem than like some-

one's attempt to file for a patent on his life. But I'm not really interested in either trashing or defending this poem. What interests me is this: that Lerner's notion of the poem as "quite simply, confession" reveals that he and Lowell *share* an understanding of confession—or, at least, of its odd relationship to poetry. They both see a spectrum stretching from poetry on the one side to confession on the other, with confessional poetry perched (boldly or foolishly) in the middle. Wanting neither to submit to the strictures of poetic craft nor to revert to "mere confession" (a cliché on both sides of this debate), confessional poetry dwells in a no-man's-land.⁷⁴ It may mount forays "back into" one side or the other, as Lowell claims his "breakthrough" poems had done, but the confessional poem's ambivalent status and shifting position are key. Confessionalism is the endless rehearsal for a breakthrough.

The Art of the Breakthrough

A breakthrough back into life. I had tossed the phrase around for years—studied it, cited it, parsed it, and generally made much of it—but one day, for no particular reason, I heard it as if for the very first time. It carried a whiff of the outlaw—*a break-in to life?*—which might account for my sudden fascination, but on reflection I couldn't be sure I was right in hearing so much *violence* in this phrase. So, I did what any lover of language would do: I consulted the corpora.

The data told the tale. From utter obscurity, the word "breakthrough" sprang into public discourse in English over the course of 1939. It spiked in 1945, rose steadily through the 1950s, and has been ascendant ever since. Today, we speak nonstop about breakthroughs—technological, scientific, therapeutic, emotional, spiritual, or organizational—but, as you may have already guessed from the years listed above, it was, at first, a military term. It actually originated in the trench warfare of World War I, where it described the hard-won breach of an enemy line, but it entered the popular lexicon of English speakers only after World War II. Once a flurry of breakthroughs had ended that war (see the mid-1940s spike on the Ngram in Figure I.4), American soldiers brought "breakthrough" home alongside novelties like kamikaze, blockbuster, and flak.

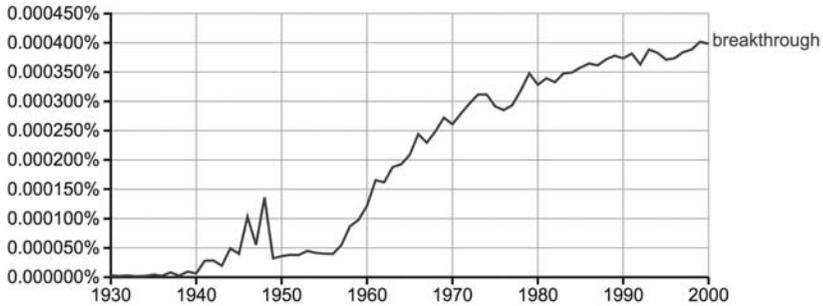


Figure I.4. American print usage of the word “breakthrough.” Google Books Ngram Viewer.

If these words slid into metaphor over the ensuing years—shedding some or all of their wartime significance—they were helped along by the Cold War, which tended to render war itself a metaphor. To track the word “breakthrough” through any magazine or newspaper of the time is to witness, in slow motion, how the Cold War normalized an intangible, pervasive concept of war.⁷⁵ In *Time* magazine, for instance, you’ll first see “breakthroughs” on the abstract fronts of a war without battlefields: as in “a strategic breakthrough in the cold war” or “a major research breakthrough” or “metallurgical breakthrough” in its arms race.⁷⁶ Then come the self-consciously elaborate conceits of war—e.g., “the biggest breakthrough in the long stalemated war against polio” or “the most promising breakthrough yet on the antibody front.”⁷⁷ Finally, knowing puns creep in, as in the 1957 article about possible vaccines for the common cold called—yes, of course—“Cold War Breakthrough.”⁷⁸ Only one or two years before Lowell’s famous usage does the metaphor begin to go dead. And even then it still shows signs of life, since people mostly use it to describe advances in industry—the domestic front in the global war on communism.

Breakthrough was clearly, in this moment, a master metaphor, the perfect counterpart to another keyword of that era, “containment.” This was the name famously given by George F. Kennan to America’s Cold War strategy for stemming the spread of communism; it was also, according to Alan Nadel, a cultural logic of far-reaching consequence. American Cold War culture, Nadel argues, “equated containment of communism with containment of atomic secrets, of sexual license, of

gender roles, of nuclear energy, and of artistic expression.”⁷⁹ It was, in short, a metaphor that Cold Warriors lived by. “Breakthrough,” I suggest, is containment’s natural complement—a world-shaping metaphor of equal and opposite force. The enemy must be contained; the white-hats, always breaking through! But Lowell and his ilk weren’t exactly the white-hats. “I am kind of a secret beatnik hiding in the suburbs,” Anne Sexton confessed in 1959.⁸⁰ And no matter how ideologically bland they may seem to us now, confessionalists saw themselves this way: as the enemy within, lurking in the suburban middle class, plotting a breakthrough past the forces of cultural containment.

This may seem like the long way around to interpreting a few words tossed off by a poet giving an interview—but if we restore to the word “breakthrough” its midcentury connotations of violent rupture from containment, then we can start to understand why people thrilled at (and recoiled from) confessionalism the way they did. Without accepting a boosterish view of such art or of its service on the cultural front of the Cold War, we can at least say this: confessionalists stuck their fingers in the wound of containment, reenacted the trauma of being contained and the triumph of breaking through.

* * *

This art of breakthrough drew energy from another postwar trend: the rise of what Daniel Belgrad calls a “culture of spontaneity.”

. . . the impulse to valorize spontaneous improvisation runs like a long thread through the cultural fabric of the period, appearing also in bebop jazz music, in modern dance and performance art, in ceramic sculpture, and in philosophical, psychological, and critical writings.⁸¹

Working in “media that responded quickly or easily to the impulse of the moment,” many postwar artists and thinkers entered “into improvisational ‘dialogue’ with [their] materials.”⁸² Breakthrough artists were also involved in such dialogue, though usually with less responsive kinds of media. Printed text did not respond “quickly or easily” (or at all) “to the impulse of the moment.” So, instead, confessionalists had to dramatize—either within these texts, or in their manner of performing them—a struggle against fixity and stagnation. Robert Lowell did

this by “mak[ing] little changes just impromptu as [he] read” his earliest confessional poems in public.⁸³ And by 1976, when Caedmon Records captured one of his readings live, these encrustations threatened to overwhelm his poems altogether. If this feels like a radical attack on the autonomy of these poems, well, that’s because it is. *Of course, these poems aren’t autonomous*, Lowell seems to be saying, *They emerged from my life, and they are emerging still.*

Donald Hall, expressing his distaste for Lowell’s way of reading, reaches for a telling comparison: “I have heard Robert Lowell play his audience with the skill and vulgarity of Ed McMahon.”⁸⁴ David Wojahn, in an essay dismissing poetry readings as “a kind of vaudeville,” clarifies the reasons for such a complaint. While he praises one poet for a rambling lead-in to a poem whose “timing and phrasing are worthy of a stand-up comic’s,” he insists that such standup-style talk “should offer a counterpoint to the more special diction of the writer’s poems.” In other words, the glib spontaneity of standup comedy is fine, so long as it doesn’t seep into the poems. These, Wojahn says, should stay “clear and precise,” performed in a “neutral but not emotionless” manner.⁸⁵

These queasy feelings of attraction and repulsion were mutual: poetry and comedy circled each other at midcentury, exchanging anxious glances. Comedy, for its part, went back and forth between wanting to claim the protections of kinship and wanting to disavow poetry as hopelessly square. Lenny Bruce, for example, did both. When he was first brought up on obscenity charges, it was in front of the same judge who, five years earlier, had handed down the famous ruling in favor of Ginsberg’s *Howl*—and Bruce’s lawyer, Al Bendich (who also argued the *Howl* case), called in experts to defend Bruce’s act as a kind of poetry. One Berkeley professor, Don Geiger, even went so far as to read a John Berryman “dream song” into the record.⁸⁶ As Bruce, a self-taught expert in obscenity law, would know, this analogy was part of a sound legal strategy. Obscenity law, at the time, required that the local particulars of art—by themselves, perhaps, obscene—be justified by appeals to an aesthetic “totality” to which these details were essential. At the height of New Critical power, nothing epitomized this sort of “totality” better than a poem.

But these ideas of a stable, integrated “totality” couldn’t be further from the truth of Bruce’s practice. No matter how much he might rely on

(and repeat verbatim) a handful of well-crafted “bits,” he identified most with those moments when his act went spontaneous. Unlike comedy, he would have scoffed, poetry cannot achieve true spontaneity. This, anyway, is the gist of one bit on his 1959 debut album, in which he skewers two of poetry’s recent bids for spontaneous expression: confessional poetry and “poetry and jazz.” While a jazz combo plays in the background, Bruce recites (in doggerel verse) a mock confession to bestiality:

Psychopathia sexualis

I’m in love with a horse that comes from Dallas.

Poor neurotic-a me.⁸⁷

It’s easy to see why the performance genre of “poetry and jazz” earned Bruce’s scorn. A bunch of squares were suddenly haunting the same jazz clubs he played, trying to mooch an air of hip spontaneity. One Bruce biographer, Albert Goldman, perhaps thinking of this bit, goes on his own rant against poetry and jazz, and he reveals the hidden stakes of this argument. “Jazz was one thing,” Goldman observes, “Poetry another. Comedy was something in between.”⁸⁸ In order to carve out this intermediate space, Bruce exaggerated the elasticity of jazz and the woodenness of poetry performance.

* * *

In mocking poetry’s out-of-touch rigidity, Bruce was in fact acting out one of his own deepest nightmares—that he might be reduced to an unchanging text. This anxiety suffuses Bruce’s most elaborate bit, the famous twenty-minute “Palladium” sketch. In it, a mediocre standup comedian named Frank Dell, feeling restless in his slow-growing American career, strong-arms his manager into booking him into the variety lineup at London’s famous Palladium Theatre. Although Dell clearly isn’t the sort of guy with whom Bruce would *like* to identify, he does—in spite of himself. Not only that: Bruce goes out of his way to make Dell resemble him, plucking him from the same small-time world in which Bruce first honed craft, giving Dell his own age and drug addiction, and generally encouraging the comparison. Don’t get me wrong: it’s not an image of who Bruce was, but it’s a terrifying image of who he might have become.

Dell's act bombs during his debut at the Palladium, to the point where he must beg the theater's booking agent to give him a second chance. The next night, though, things only get worse: the act just before Dell's ends on a "moment of silence" for "the poor boys who went to Dunkirk and never came back." Amid a general rapture of tears, Dell begins—and repeats to his puffy-eyed audience the same corny opening line:

Folks, a funny thing: I just got back from a delightful, crazy little town, a crazy, crazy place called *Lost Wages*. You know folks, a funny thing about working *Lost Wages*, Nevada. . . .⁸⁹

Not only are the words identical, but the tone is precisely the same two nights running: the polished smarm of a hopelessly fixed act. When Dell does force himself to try something new—shouting "SCREW THE IRISH!" in a last-ditch effort to get a response—he incites not laughter, but an all-out riot. He flees backstage where he's confronted by the theater's booker:

Now look, son, I don't mind these boys—they come out, and they start with the same word every night, they finish with the same word, perhaps they're not too creative or funny, maybe—but goddamn, son, . . . there's a difference between not getting laughs and changing the architecture of the theater!⁹⁰

It's a perfect Freudian dream of discipline: deriding Dell for sticking to the script, but then damning him the second he dares to depart from it. John Limon, author of *Stand-Up Comedy in Theory*, would surely see this as an example of how Bruce stages "abjection," which Limon defines (via Julia Kristeva) as "a psychic worrying of those aspects of oneself that one cannot be rid of, that seem, but are not quite alienable."⁹¹ It's not just that Bruce fears he can't rid himself of the small-time Dell within; it's also that his words, once fixed—whether by habit or transcription—feel like a horrific containment of the self.

* * *

This nightmare would soon play out for Bruce in the criminal courts. In every city he played, district attorneys started sending police officers

to record or transcribe his act in hopes of substantiating a charge of obscenity against him. Nothing can fix a performance quite like the gaze of the law, which, besides preferring text to any other medium, always demands a stable object of complaint and defense. As Bruce put it in one of his final nightclub appearances,

I do my act—perhaps, uh, eleven o'clock at night. Little do I know that eleven a.m. the next morning, before the grand jury somewhere, there's another guy [i.e., a police officer] doing my act, who's introduced as Lenny Bruce, in substance. *Here he is, Lenny Bruce!* (In substance.) . . . The grand jury watches him work, and they go, "That stinks!" But I get busted. And the irony is, I have to go to court and defend *his* act.⁹²

Almost the entire ensuing performance (filmed and released as *The Lenny Bruce Performance Film*) is spent reading and commenting on the transcripts from one of these trials. It's a playful idea: the prosecutor's case, which naturally leaps from one salacious bit to the next, enables Bruce to do the same. (After all, surely the district attorney wasn't being obscene!) Meanwhile, Bruce gets to laugh along with the audience at the police and prosecutors, who, like a bunch of Frank Dells, crib his act and then butcher it before a stone-faced audience of judges. Not too far beneath the surface of this irony, though, is something darker and more sincere. As Bruce alternates between voicing the state's powerful words and rambling through his own powerless commentary on them, it almost feels as if he's trapped behind that sheaf of papers—not just in the literal sense, like a poet burying his face in a manuscript—but also in a more abject, figurative sense. When Bruce finally stopped appealing his convictions for obscenity, he gave this reason: "I don't want to win the right to do another comedian's act."⁹³ But here he was doing exactly that. The Lenny Bruce before our eyes can't quite seem to upstage that other guy: Lenny Bruce, in substance. Once a liberated and liberatory comedian, Bruce had allowed himself to be chained to this other Lenny—the one who seems, but never is quite alienable.

But ponder this: what if this dynamic isn't unique to a comedian's run-in with the law? After all, one lesson of "The Palladium" seems to be that these dangers inhere in performance itself. What Bruce is doing with that trial transcript is just an obvious (and dour) version of what

made his best performances whirl—namely, the tension between the pleasures of repetition and the thrills of spontaneous digression. Spontaneity, after all, is valued not for itself, but for its departure from fixed conventions or forms.

This thrill, invoking a script only in order to break it, is captured perfectly by Albert Goldman in his breathless reconstruction of a typical Bruce performance. “Everybody knows this piece from the record,” Goldman says of an unnamed “classic” sketch, but there’s a kind of pleasure in hearing it repeated. “People are like children,” Goldman muses, “They want to hear the same story in the same words over and over again.”⁹⁴ However, the choicest pleasure—in comedy, if not in bedtime stories—lies in waiting for that moment of expansion or variation. This departure will feel like a moment of contact, of access to the comedian himself. Describing another well-known bit later in the performance, Goldman exclaims, “Suddenly the needle skitters off the record. Everybody knows this bit . . . [but] tonight there’s more.”⁹⁵ You go to a Bruce show, in other words, neither to hear spontaneous Bruce nor to hear him reproduce himself, but to witness as the copy gives way to the original. As Bruce’s work went confessional, this play of freedom and constraint came to dramatize our access to Bruce’s own, true self. Here he was—more than text, beyond the album—off the record, off script. Lenny Bruce was live and breaking through!

* * *

Comedians weren’t alone in feeling that the texts they produced pinned them down like dried-out moths. Poets, too, in the age of the reading, could feel this same uncanny sense of entrapment. In fact, though much has been written about the shock of immediacy and liveness that readings introduced into poetry, it’s as easy to say that readings introduced poets to feelings of mediation and deadness. Most poets now had a poem they simply dreaded repeating—one that went dead for them long ago, but that their audience continued to demand. In fact, every poem threatened to grow a bit of this deadness inside—so poets *had* to find a way to break through.

In 1965, Anne Sexton reached for a telling analogy when, on the eve of a ten-day reading tour, she wrote a letter of complaint to Elizabeth Bishop: “in the end,” she wrote, “the ‘reading’ is a gastly [*sic*] sort of

show—an act such as a comedian has.”⁹⁶ Just like Bruce, Sexton felt herself turning into Dell, reducing her poems into deathly things. Fortunately, like Bruce, she turned this pitfall into a source of creative energy and confessional spectacle.

It was that same year when Sexton unearthed an old poem, one she had considered including in her debut book, but which wound up at the bottom of a drawer. Back then, it was called “I Live in a Dollhouse,” but as she polished it up for inclusion in her third book, she renamed it “Self in 1958.” The poem would become a mainstay of her readings, and it’s easy to see why. To perform this piece was to reflect on confessional art, which always must fathom the distance between past and present selves, dead texts and live performance. Her very presence, each time she performed this poem, would attest to the difference between a text and a self—between all textual selves and the self performed. *I may be in this text*, she’s saying, *but I’m also beside and beyond it*. Like Lenny Bruce’s transcript bit, Sexton’s “Self in 1958” is the act of a breakthrough artist.

Once more, that sentence of M. L. Rosenthal’s comes to mind—only now with a different emphasis: “The *use* of poetry for the most naked kind of confession grows apace in our day.”⁹⁷ Understood as the art of breaking through, confessionalism is an ongoing experiment in the *use* of autobiography, whatever medium it may happen to inhabit at the moment. Here, in the cases of Bruce and Sexton, it’s an unbound stack of typescript pages, but the same would hold true for any medium. The confessional performer is “the player of different media” and “acts in the empty spaces between [these] media.”⁹⁸ Masters of media, they are inhabitants of none. They dwell in a no-man’s-land, plotting a breakthrough back into life.

* * *

This book’s twin keywords, confession and performance, both permit—no, depend upon—such play across media. This sort of play has real consequences: outsourcing their irony to the “interpolated distance” of mediation itself, confessional performers free themselves for a certain tonal and philosophical sincerity.⁹⁹ We are often unprepared to hear just how sincere they are trying to be. The resulting blend of sincerity and irony is arguably the defining affect of American culture

since modernism. No one has given a better account of this affect than Shoshana Felman, who calls the people who experience this affect “Don Juans.”

Modern Don Juans, they know that *truth is only an act*. That is why they subvert the truth and do not promise it, but *promise themselves to it*.¹⁰⁰

Acknowledging the importance of performance in a postmodern world, we need not succumb to the old antitheatrical notion that a world performed is a false, fallen one. After all, even the truth must be performed. So, why not commit ourselves to confession? Why not promise performance?