

Autobiographical English poetry in the twentieth century: A critical study in themes and perspectives

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Abstract

Autobiographical poetry can be defined as one in which the poet propounds an account of his/her life, as well as self-revelation, self-exploration, self-estimation and thoughtful and analytical excursions into the self.

While making a critical and creative intervention into the relationship between poetry and autobiography, this paper embarks upon presenting a survey of autobiographical English poetry in the twentieth century, showing affinities and differences among poets in consonance with the applications of autobiographical elements and concerned voice in their poems. This study is restricted to the twentieth century British poetry in particular, Irish and American poetry in general, offering a critical commentary on the works of representative individual poets or groups of poets in a chronological order (following in most cases the poets' birth dates). Hence, the survey shifts back and forth from British to American or Irish poetry according to that order. Also, the main argument of this paper is centered upon steering and establishing a solid distinction between autobiographical and lyrical poetry on one hand, and autobiographical and confessional poetry on the other hand. In addition, the paper aims to make a brief study of some eminent poets who wrote lyrical poetry, autobiographical poetry and those who are categorised as "the Oxford Group of Poets".

Keywords: autobiographical, critical, confessional, emotions, experiences, lyrical, modernism, personal, poetry, realism, self, self-revelation, twentieth century, war poetry

Introduction

The 20th century English poetry emerged in the early years of the 20th century through various schools, styles, and influences, and its growth obviously features three phases:

1st Phase

The first phase of the movement, the school of imagism, the style of French symbolist poetry influence of Dome and the dominance of war poetry, these were all different manifestations of modernism in English poetry (1909-16).

2nd Phase

During the flowering of Modernist poetry between 1917 and 1929, the 2nd phase of the movement, all these initial manifestations of modernism combined to find a full nature expression in the poetry of T.S. Eliot, Edith Sitwell and later Yeats most notable of which is, Eliot's *The Waste Land*, Sitwell's *Gold Coast Customs* and Yeats's *Michael Robartes and the Dances*.

3rd Phase

The 3rd and the final phase of Modernist is largely the decade of the 30s which is marked by the vibrant contributions of the oxford group of poets such as Auden, Louis McNiece, C. Day-Lewis and Stephen Spender.

Autobiography

Under the term autobiography, the Oxford Dictionary states: "[It] is an account of a person's life written by that person" I We can see the etymology of the noun autobiography (formed by three Greek words: autós, 'self' bios, 'life' and grápho, "I write") and so the sense of its decomposition into three phonemes is: the description (graphia) of a single

human life (bios) by the same individual (auto). The term 'autobiography' is recent, as it appeared only around the end of the eighteenth century, first in German literature, then in English literature.

Autobiographical poetry

Autobiographical poetry can be defined as one in which the poet inquisitively propounds an account of his/her life, as well as self-revelation, self-exploration and "thoughtful and analytical excursions into the self" (Penguin 63-64) [2]. The speaker in autobiographical poetry is not a persona but the poet himself witnessing ups and downs of life, external unavoidable influences, social conditions as well. Very occasionally, an autobiographical poem is rather long, covering long periods in poet's real life; however, it sometimes presents some fictional details. Distinct from "confessional" poetry, which gives frank and minute details related to the poet's private life, grief, pain, and tension, autobiographical poetry may exclude "disagreeable facts" or distort truth "for the sake of convenience or harmony" (Penguin 63) [2]. William Wordsworth's (1750-1830) poem, *The Prelude*, best exemplifies autobiographical poetry. In this fourteen-book autobiography, the poet traces his life from infancy through school and college at Cambridge, his experience in France during the French Revolution and other later experiences. In the course of the poem, his literal journeys become metaphoric ones with sharp and keep focus on the investigation and delineation of his interior psyche, memory, private relation to nature and poetic development. The speaker in this poem is Wordsworth

himself who addresses himself to his friend, Coleridge and his English people at large.

Review of literature

Every work of art that a writer creates or writes actually carries some germ of the writer's life. Thereby any attempt to say something about a poem or any piece of literature is actually an attempt to say something about one's own self. Kamala Das, in her autobiography *My Story* asserts that "... a poet's raw material is not stone or clay; it is her personality." This assertion confirms the presence of autobiographical elements in Kamala Das's poem and at the same time underlines the importance of injecting autobiographical themes into poems.

Poetry, as a means of expressing the self in verse, has constantly fascinated writers/readers. Very early cases include Catullus and Ovid, whose Latin poems *Carmina* and *Tristia* treat pertinent questions of lives faced with controversy and exile. In the Middle Ages, French and German troubadours, such as Chrétien de Troyes and Walther von der Vogelweide, sought to cultivate a courtly mode of self-fashioning in their songs. Likewise, ever since the Renaissance, some of the most eminent writers have penned significant works in the form of autobiographical poems. Dante's *Vita Nuova*, Petrarch's *Canzoniere*, Matsuo Basho's *The Narrow Road to the Interior*, Shakespeare's *Sonnets*, Goethe's *Sesenheim Songs*, Wordsworth's *The Prelude (Growth of a Poet's Mind)*, and Walt Whitman's *Song of Myself* (that remarkably opens with the line, "I celebrate myself, and sing myself") are a few in the list, termed as crucial milestones of the genre.

Autobiographical modes to denote, represent and narrate the 'self' poetically are located at the very centre of lyrical expression: whether in love poems, religious poetry, historiographic or epic poems, to name but a few, the poet is often intertwined with the text in an approach to formulate selfhood. In the 20th and 21st centuries, autobiographical poetry has also been widely practised throughout literature, with Modernists and Postmodernists such as the German authors Bertolt Brecht (*Of Poor B.B.*) and Gottfried Benn (1886), the Turkish poet Nâzım Hikmet (*Otobiyografi*), and the American writer Lyn Hejinian (*My Life*) stretching the boundaries of life-writing in verse. In the footsteps of writers like these, Robert Lowell's and Sylvia Plath's *Confessional Poetry* continues the constant stream of lyrical autobiography alongside the multi-layered lyrics of well-versed songwriters/poets, such as Leonard Cohen, to point out just one example. Thus, the significance of autobiographical poetry embedded to not only for life-writing, but to literature in general is beyond question.

Autobiographical poetry, as a segment of life-writing, can be characterised by both a thematic and a formal component. Thematically, firstly, the analysed texts subscribe to the three quintessential etymological dimensions that Georg Misch's classical definition has spelled out: 'the description (graphia) of an individual human life (bios) by the individual himself (auto)' (Misch 1949 [1907], 7; 1950, 5).^[3] Hence, the texts contribute with thought-provoking insights to the millennia-long and worldwide tradition of autobiographical life-writing, here especially with regards to modern American, British, German, and Scandinavian authors from 19th-century

Victorian England to the present day, i.e., W. Abdullah Quilliam, Elizabeth Bishop, Gerard Manley Hopkins, Sylvia Plath, Adrienne Rich, Anne Sexton, Jan Wagner, and Yahya Hassan. The individual life circumstances of these writers are quite varied, as are their autobiographical topics, ranging from coming-of-age experiences and depictions of bodies to religious initiations and, of course, their respective careers and capacities as poets. The smallest common denominator of their textual approaches thus speculates on the texts' constitutive acts of turning mundane 'life' into literary 'art', or, to use a distinction made by Lawrence Buell, of selecting, synthesising, and transforming 'worldscape' into 'wordscape'.

The formal component, secondly, lies in the fact that the texts use poetry in particular as their medium of autobiographical expression. Therefore, they employ many of the standard devices of the lyric that set them apart from their epic counterparts, for example by brevity instead of lengthiness, verse instead of prose, and rhymes as well as meter. Overall, the texts in question thus substantially deviate from 'everyday speech', since they dedicate a heightened attention to the acoustic and the visual capacities of language, as demonstrated, for example, by sound devices and by the widespread insertion of metaphors, symbols, and further means of figurative speaking. In addition, they ruminate and determine features that usually put poetry in a position close to autobiographical writing filled with notes of self-reflexivity, directness, and structural simplicity in poems.

Discussion and Analysis

Autobiographical Poetry of Modern British literature

Every work of art that a writer creates or writes actually drums up some germ of the writer's life. Thereby any attempt to say something about a poem or any piece of literature is actually an attempt to say something about one's own self.⁴

In the light of points, put forth above, it is equally relevant to acknowledge that autobiographical poetry is not a new phenomenon in twentieth century English literature, but it goes back to earlier stages. For example, the British romantics were immersed into personal expression of the self and reflection of their private relation to nature, unlike the Augustans who were engaged in abstract depiction of universal truth. Their autobiographical poems and personal lyrics formed great influences on twentieth century poetry. On the other shore of the Atlantic Ocean, the American transcendentalists - Emerson (1803-1882) and Thoreau (1817-1862) - wrote about their personal feelings, beliefs and experiences rather than about philosophies and logical abstractions. Walt Whitman (1819-1892) and Emily Dickinson (1830-1886), for examples, were two of the most influential sources on modern poets. Like the British romantics, they believed in the great value of personal experiences. Hence, their poetry celebrated their egotistical "self," social, political and even sexual experiences. In other

words, through their poems, they appear wrestling with the inner conflict created by promoting the self in one's poems, blending fact with fiction, balancing the private and the public, or possibly compromising a concern for ethical behavior in presenting one's literary persona while producing effective poetry.

Notes of Realism

It is also a vital point that the poetry of the 20th century is marked with a note of realism which is the brilliant product of a reaction against the pseudo-romanticism of the last century over and above the influence of science. Moreover, the modern poets look at life with the lenses of realities and attempt to paint it as it is with all its wait and ugliness. They tear the veil which the romanticists had hug between life and art. Robert Frost, Edmund Blunden, and Gibson are the poets of realism in modern poetry.⁵

Lyrical Poetry: a Vehicle of Self-expression

"Lyrical Poetry" is defined as a subjective verse, often brief, that summons the feelings and thoughts of a single speaker (who may or may not represent the poet. The main difference between autobiographical and lyrical poetry, beside differences in form, musicality and voice, is that "whereas an autobiographical poem is set in the past, telling what happened, a lyric is set in the present, catching a speaker in a moment of expression. But a lyric can [also] glance backward or forward" (Sylvan Barnet 640-41).^[6] Modern lyric poetry is a formal type of poetry which speaks of personal emotions or feelings. The English Georgian poets and their contemporaries, such as A.E. Housman, Walter de la Mare and Edmund Blunden used the lyric form with all sincerity and pleasure. Lyric poetry dealing with relationships, sex, and domestic life constituted the new mainstream of American poetry in the middle of the 20th century, following such movements like "Confessional Poetry".

Roughly speaking, lyrical poetry is divided into two categories: the 'personal', wherein the speaker is the poet, or at least has many affinities with him; and the 'impersonal', wherein the speaking voice is that of a persona that is completely detached from the poet. In this latter category, the poet stands outside of and detached from what he is composing about, for he writes about other people rather than about himself. Wordsworth's *Tintern Abbey*, The Daffodils and Christina Rossetti's (1830-1894) *No, Thank You, John* are exquisite examples of the personal lyric, while Keats's (1795-1821) *Ode on a Grecian Urn* and *Ode to a Nightingale* exemplify the umbrella of impersonal lyric. This paper assumes that personal lyrics are also autobiographical, since they embody a great deal of autobiographical elements. In many of the poems chosen below for critical commentary, the speakers appear as the poets themselves. Known for their brevity and emotional intensity, personal lyrics become convenient vehicles to convey the poets' personal feelings and thoughts.

It is hereby in the fitness of things to examine in brief Thomas Hardy and D.H. Lawrence as poets of lyrics and their contributions.

Thomas Hardy (1840-1928) is the first British poet who launches us into twentieth century poetry. He began his career as a poet. Though he was not able to find a publisher, he continued to write poetry. Hardy's verses consist of short

lyrics describing nature and natural beauty. Like his novels, the poems reveal concern with man's unequal struggle against the mighty fate.⁷ *Wessex Poems*, *Winter Words*, and *Collected Poems* are his major poetry works in which he primarily champions his agnostic philosophies of nature, fate, time and God in many dramatic poems, but he writes about personal events, episodes, memories and feelings in personal lyrics. His first wife Emma appears as a central figure in his 1912-1913 poems. After more than thirty-five years of unhappy marriage, she died in 1912. Ironically enough, her death elicits from him the greatest of his personal lyrics, in which he experiences remorse for his part in their decades of hostility. Michael Schmidt comments: "they are poems of guilt as much as love" (16)^[8]. In fact, they record very intense and charged emotions, mixed sometimes by a flaring desire for her.

In his posthumously published volume, *Winter Words in Various Moods and Metres*, Hardy offers a large proportion of personal lyrics, portrays real women and shows a change of attitude towards life. He moves "towards recovery - from sorrow to acceptance" (Linda Austin 1).^[9, 11] In some other love lyrics, Hardy replaced the dim portrayals of nature - associated in his sub-consciousness with his first wife - by neutral ones. The alchemy of remembering itself was diminished by stoical joys; the intense perturbed memories of the past yielded themselves to the calm actualities of the present. Hardy's personal lyrics reflect many autobiographical facts in his life. Nevertheless, he does not reveal himself directly, but he speaks through personae or masks. The various lovers, seers, pessimists and optimists he presents in his lyric "So Various" are projections of his own self; in other words, "they are aspects of himself" (T. D. Armstrong 391).^[10]

Like Hardy's, D. H. Lawrence's (1885-1930) poetic grandeur and achievement are almost overshadowed by his reputation as a novelist. However, he is one of the twentieth century poets who write fine personal lyrics in which he records personal incidents and relationships that disturb him. His *Discord in Childhood* portrays the emotional tension that notably characterizes the relationship between his parents. Many personal lyrics in his first volume, *Love Poems and Others* (1913), explore his relationship with his demanding mother and his frustrated love affairs with different women. They concentrate on the ambiguous nature of his relationship with his possessive mother who seems to have been the direct cause of his thwarted love affairs as well as other emotional problems. Commenting on such poems, Schmidt says, "they were written guiltily, 'as if it were a secret sin', because they were autobiographical" (97)¹¹ Nevertheless, her death in 1910 elicits from him some elegies such as *Sorrow*, *Brooding Grief* and *Piano*.

The First World War Poetry

The First World War brought to public notice many poets, particularly among the young men of armed forces, while it provided a new source of inspiration for writers of established reputation. Rupert Brooke, Siegfried Sassoon, and Wilfred Owen are the major War poets. Rupert Brooke's famous sonnet "If I should die, think only this of me" has appeared in so many anthologies of twentieth century verse. Brooke turned to nature and simple pleasures for inspiration. He wrote with a "youthful, healthy joy in life, a subtlety of observation"¹² Sassoon wrote violent and embittered poems. He, on the ground of his first-hand

knowledge of the conditions of warfare, his thorny experience of war-horrors painted the horrors of life and death in trenches, dugouts and hospitals. Wilfred Owen was the greatest of the war poets. In the beginning of his literary career, Owen wrote in the romantic tradition of John Keats and Lord Tennyson, but, later on, he switched manifesting his experiences of brutal war-horrors and devastations, and even "pity of war" which spark his personal emotions too. Owen was a gifted artist with a fine feeling for words. He greatly experimented in verse techniques.¹³

The First World War poets produced a good number of fine personal lyrics manifesting and recording their real war experiences, and igniting new hope for peace because the war came as terrific shock to the society. Despite their individual and poetic differences, they had many things in common. First, before the beginning of war, most of them shared the same primary feeling of patriotism, which prompted them to quit schools or colleges and join armed forces. Second, while on the front, they tried to justify and rationalize their patriotism. They rejoiced the opportunity of self-sacrifice in the cause of human freedom, and a revival of the romantic conceptions of the knight-at-arms. Third, disillusioned by the atrocities of war, they protested against its inevitable continuity and hostility by giving vent to their personal feelings and emotions. They also attacked the army leaders and politicians for perpetuating the misery of people, especially young men who had to fight.

Although their poetry documents personal experiences in trenches and training camps, it also records the agonies of a whole generation. As the carnage grew more appalling and the end seemed as distant as ever, other poets rose with the declared intention of shattering the illusion of the splendor of war by a frankly realistic picture of the suffering, brutality, squalor, and futility of the struggle. The work of this last group, though at first greeted with derision or angry protest, has probably withstood the passage of time better than that of the earlier. Perhaps something of its realism and its depth of understanding has formed a sounded echo in that experience of disillusioned post-war generations.

The Post-War Period of Poetry and Personal Lyrics

The post-war period heralded a new era of experimentation with English language and poetics, bringing into existence what is known as Modernism. Despite the concentration of this modern school of poetry on objective enumerations of a state of degradation, sense of desolation, uncertainty, futility, etc., some poets were still on the carpet of writing autobiographical and lyrical poems; Robert Frost (1874-1963) was one of them. In his personal lyrics, *Wood-Pile*, *Mending Wall* and *After Apple-Picking* - which make use of the first person pronoun - Frost portrays himself engaged in real daily activities such as chopping woods, cleaning springs, building fences or picking apples: typical activities of rural New England life. In 1895, Frost married Elinor Miriam White, who became a major inspiration to his poetry until her death in 1938. In his personal lyric, *The Subverted Flower*, for example, he introduces a very personal episode during his early courtship of her. The poem shows an intense, youthful and passionate love for the lady, who will later become his wife.

The Modern School of Poetry

When the twentieth century opened, Tennyson had been dead nine years, and there was a wide spread impression

that English poetry had died with him. The apprehensions of the critics on modern poetry, however, proved baseless. Modern poetry, as a matter of fact, has given a rich harvest of poetic thought in the style and diction in a peculiar manner. In modern age there "has been no dearth of great poets or great poems that will stand the test of time and become a part of the imperishable literary heritage of England.

The modern school of poetry owes much to the efforts of two great American expatriates on British territories: Ezra Pound (1885-1972) and T.S. Eliot (1888-1965). It was Pound more than anyone else who made poets write modern verse; his motto was "Make it new." In fact, he is, on broader canvas, considered the poet most responsible for defining and promoting a modernist aesthetic in poetry. Moreover, he stresses the suppression of subjectivity in favor of objectivity. Although Pound has been widely discussed as a progenitor of Imagism, he is treated here as a poet who writes autobiographical poems and personal lyrics. This appears as a sharp paradox in Pound's work. He tries to suppress the expression of the self, yet many poems reflect an expression of it. Herbert Schneidau ascribes this paradox to the heavy influence of Browning's (1812-1889) dramatic monologues, which had dominated "the poetic landscape" of Pound's youth (164). He adds, "the speaker in a Pound poem, no matter what mask he wears, is always Pound himself" (166).^[14] Pound's autobiographical poem, *The Cantos*, which he started in 1917 and continued over a period of fifty years, deals with personal events in his life. For example, some of his later cantos handle his arrest and confinement in 1945 by the American army, as he was accused of broadcasting Fascist propaganda by radio to the U.S.A. during the Second World War.

Stephen Coote proposes that Hulme's anti-romantic expression of personality influenced Eliot (like Pound), and it developed in him a dislike for the poetic exploitation of the author's own personality. He adds, "it follows that we must learn to see his work not as the outpourings of an overcharged soul, a revelation of the private experience he was careful to protect, but as series of artifacts, well-made verses that communicate matured experience" (17).^[15] On the other hand, Martin Scofield confirms that Eliot's "poetry can still be seen in a significant sense as 'personal', the expression of personal feeling" (4).^[16] I think that despite Eliot's insistence on the necessity of escaping self-expression in his famous essay, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," some of his poems, which cannot be classified as either autobiographical or personal lyrics, contain some autobiographical elements. Though he tries to escape direct expression of the self, many poems reveal a hidden Eliot behind his legendary texts.

William Butler Yeats (1865-1939) began his literary career in the early 1890s in the tradition of the self-conscious romantics, mainly affected by Blake's (1757-1827) and Shelley's (1792-1822) personal lyrics. His themes and imagery of this period were basically derived from his

personal experiences and his knowledge of country places and folklore. In the following years, Irish nationalist movements and their leading figures intrigued him. This interest is reflected in poems such as September 1913 and Easter 1916.

Like so many of his contemporaries, Yeats was acutely conscious of the spiritual barrenness of his age, "and his whole artistic career is best seen as an attempt, at first to escape from the sordid materialism which he found on every hand, and later to formulate a new positive ideal which would supply his spiritual needs".¹⁷ Yeats often expressed his ideas a carefully-devised system of symbols, some purely private, other drawn from his study of philosophy or his reading in the works the French symbolists, or of earlier symbolical poets, particularly Blake and Shelley. A believer in magic and kindred arts, Yeats sought to escape into the land of 'faery', and looked for his themes in Irish legend and the simple, elemental impulses of man's primitive nature (Albert 524).^{[12], 18} Whereas Yeats received the Nobel Prize in Literature chiefly for his dramatic works, his significance today rests on his lyric achievement. His poetry, especially the volumes *The Wild Swans at Coole* (1919), *Michael Robartes and the Dancer* (1921), *The Tower* (1928), *The Winding Stair and Other Poems* (1933), and *Last Poems and Plays* (1940), made him one of the outstanding and most influential twentieth-century poets writing in English.¹⁹

The Oxford Group

The Oxford Group or The Auden Group or The Auden Generation is a formidable group of British and Irish writers active in the 1930s. The leading poets that include W. H. Auden (1907-1973), Stephen Spender (1909-1995), Louis MacNeice (1907-1963) and Cecil Day Lewis (1904-1972), introduced a new kind of autobiographical poetry in the late 1920s and early 1930s. These poets in the group were fully aware of the hollowness of the disintegrating post war civilization. Known for their left-wing sympathies and affiliations, they reflected their leftist attitudes in their poetry, proposing Marxist solutions for modern social and economic problems especially after the Stock Market Crash in 1929. During the Spanish Civil War (1936), Auden, MacNeice and Spender went to Spain to support the left-wing elected Republican government against Fascism, represented by the right-wing Spanish Army that was led by General Franco. With the defeat of the Republicans in 1938, these poets went back to England, disappointed and frustrated because they thought that that war was supposed to determine not only the democratic future of Spain but also that of Europe. Their portrayals of that war and their aborted expectations of it - as in Auden's *Spain 1937* - were derived from their first-hand experiences and personal observations.

Conclusion

In my final estimation, a good bulk of the twentieth century poetry, despite commissioning the modernist credentials for objectivity, springs from autobiographical facts in the poets' lives and careers. Through findings, deliberations and discussions in the body of this paper, it becomes clear that the British romantics have greatly influenced twentieth century poets. Many autobiographical poets express their individual selves directly, deriving their subject matter and

imagery from their private experiences, feelings, visions and states of mind, while others hide themselves behind masks or personae. Others still express their collective selves as groups representing humanity in general, a racial identity or a feminist identity. The method of self-expression differs from a poet to another or among members of one group whose poetry can be approached as the product of one poet.

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