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**Lies and truth-telling: lyric poems and autobiographical memory**

Abstract:

Many lyric poems present the reader with small poetic narratives that appear, at least implicitly, to claim that they are speaking the autobiographical truth. Examples of such works are not only to be found among avowedly ‘confessional’ 20th and 21st century works but also in 19<sup>th</sup>-century poems by authors such as Emily Dickinson, not to mention the archaic Greek poetry of Sappho. In the early 21st century the issue of how truthful literature may or may not be is much discussed and a high premium is often placed on truth telling. However, given that recent research into autobiographical memory confirms and develops Freud’s insight that remembered ‘childhood experiences ... are sometimes indisputably false’, should we believe that any works of imaginative literature that invoke the past are ever likely to be consistently true in a literal sense, or that what we read accurately represents so-called ‘authentic’ experience, even when it claims to do so? Wouldn’t it be preferable, however uneasily, to acknowledge that all truth claims in such literary works are reliable only insofar as they satisfy the demands of the works that contain them?

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## 1. The predominance of the modern lyric

Whether it is in the form of the latest poetry collections by Seamus Heaney, Les Murray or Paul Muldoon, ‘best of’ poetry volumes from various countries or further translations of the poetic fragments of the ancient Lesbian poet, Sappho, the short lyric has long been the dominant form of modern English-language poetry. The modern lyric has diverse manifestations but, generally speaking, is prized for its linguistic sophistication—including its subtlety—and its capacity to present things newly. Further, the techniques associated with defamiliarisation—particularly valued by the Russian Formalist critics of the early 20th century—and Imagism have come to characterise a great deal of contemporary poetry, even into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

A famous example of such tendencies is William Carlos Williams’ imagistic short poem, ‘The red wheelbarrow’, from 1923:

so much depends  
upon

a red wheel  
barrow

glazed with rain  
water

beside the white  
chickens.

Walter Bernhart writes of this work that;

the typical line-breaking serves the purpose of drawing attention to the semantic components of words and phrases like ‘wheelbarrow’, ‘rainwater’ or ‘white chickens’. This de-automatisation of word usage (in the Russian Formalists’ sense) reactivates genuine perception (2007: 147).

Just as important to an understanding of the post-Romantic lyric is its apparent capacity to distill key moments of personal experience. In his 1911 introduction to his anthology for school students, *Lyrical forms in English*, Norman Hepple provided a succinct statement about the characteristics of the modern lyric, and views such as Hepple’s have continued to be widely asserted even into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. He wrote:

... much of our poetry is suffused with the individuality of the writer. Directly or indirectly, he reveals his presence in a poem; his feelings vitalize it; his mood colours it; the ruggedness or delicacy of his character is betrayed in it; his own thoughts, ideals, and experiences constitute its matter; it becomes, in a way, a mirror of himself ... Now poetry of this kind is essentially a modern growth, corresponding to the immense development of individuality in modern times. (8-9)

Some writers and critics have countered this inclination to read modern lyric poetry as confessional. Most famous of these is TS Eliot, who in 1919 stated that ‘[p]oetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality’ (1976: 21). Yet Eliot subsequently

amended his views on this issue and Jewel Brooker comments that ‘[t]he perception that Eliot’s concept of impersonality seemed contradictory began early’ (2007: 42). BM Mishra notes that in Eliot’s 1940 essay on WB Yeats he ‘clarifies, modifies, and enlarges his notion of personality, and observes that Yeats’s later works bear the poet’s “greater personality in [them]”’ (2003: 6).

Whatever stance one takes on such issues, it is clear that some contemporary lyric poems are apparently more autobiographical than others. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson cautioned that we:

need to distinguish certain kinds of lyrics that announce themselves as “autobiographical” from *lyric* as an umbrella term ... Exploring texts he calls *poetic autobiographies*, such as T.S. Eliot’s *Four Quartets* and Paul Valéry’s *The Young Fate*, Olney argues that what characterizes the lyric as autobiography includes extended engagement with the uses of memory, “the web of reverie”, and internal states of consciousness (2010: 277).

The focus on autobiographical lyrics that engage ‘with the uses of memory’ are of particular interest to me. Such texts often seem to speak to the reader directly about a poet’s subjective and authentic experience. They sometimes almost seem to bring us into the poet’s presence.

## 2. A confessional culture and authenticity

A few years ago, and nearly a century after Hepple published his introduction to *Lyrical forms in English*, Susan Rosenbaum commented that ‘we live in a confessional culture, surrounded by tell-all talk shows, Internet diaries, best-selling memoirs, and autobiographical poems’ (2007: 1). Further, she stated that ‘claims to sincerity in autobiographical texts make the essentially moral promise that the author is who she says she is and that she means what she says’ (2).

If lyric poems present ways of coding autobiographical experience and memory in language, then they may appear to gain some of their value from their formulation of the ‘authentic’. Kinnahan has observed that:

the equation between ‘truthfulness’, or authenticity of voice, and ‘good poems’ ... continues to carry great force with contemporary readers and commentators, revealing the power of the lyric mode’s assumption of the humanist self as autonomous, self-aware and coherent (2004: 10).

Poems can be seen, every one in its own way, as bearing candid witness to our times, as representing what it is like for an individual to be responsive to our complex post-industrial and post-technological world.

Yet prevalent as it is, the idea of authentic utterance in literature is problematic. Phillip Vinnani and J. Patrick Williams provide a definition of authenticity that usefully summarises how many writers and readers now understand this slippery term—which has been especially prominent since the rise of Existentialism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Referencing the *Oxford English dictionary*, they write that:

A third definition ... characterizes the authentic as that which is '*real, actual.*' Here the authentic stands against replicas, pretense, and posing—a narrative common in popular culture ... Authenticity is to be understood as an inherent quality of some object, person or process. (2009: 2)

Although Vinnani and Williams are themselves sceptical about this definition—arguing in broad terms that authenticity 'is a socially constructed phenomenon' and 'an evaluative concept' (3)—to this day many people understand the 'authentic' as what is 'real' and 'actual'. They believe that it is about the facts of what happened, or about an actual emotional experience.

As a result, writers who speak directly about first-hand personal experience are often expected to adhere to the fidelity of their experience, both in terms of the facts they recount and the emotional responses they record. Those who do not do this risk being accused of insincerity, of breaking the implicit pact with the reader that Rosenbaum mentions—the understanding that 'the author is who she says she is'.

The trouble is that poets are often more sophisticated, and less concerned with facts, than their readers. Instead, many of them are more interested in the way that the artificially constructed forms of lyric poetry can mimic, evoke or suggest what looks like actual experience even when it is not—often in order to beguile the reader. Their skill lies partly in a capacity to speak about experience as if it must have happened *in just this way*.

However, in the post-Romantic period, many readers and critics do not want to believe that poetic accounts of experience are the product of artifice. Readers and critics have even looked to the ancient past—to the beginnings of the Western lyric tradition—for examples of authentic autobiographical and personal utterance. The archaic Lesbian poet, Sappho, has been a particular focus of this activity because her subject matter—as far as we can tell from four complete or nearly complete poems and numerous fragments—often appears to invoke personal and intimate relationships. Indeed, for many modern readers Sappho's voice seems to possess a quality of extraordinary candour.

Notwithstanding the troubled, war-torn history of ancient Greece, the practical realism of the Greeks in political affairs, and a culture on Lesbos that in Sappho's time was highly sophisticated, some critics have characterised this poetry in terms of a kind of innocence. For example, Barbara Fowler, in a preface to her translations in *Archaic Greek poetry*, that includes Sappho's work, stated that:

The archaic poets wrote ... of the tender flesh of young women and men ... They also described the ambrosial scent and radiance at the epiphany of one goddess; the profound shudder of nature at the birth of another ... They wrote of the dawn of the world (1992: ix).

Here is Richard Lattimore's translation of a Sappho poem that is sometimes referred to as fragment 31. In its original form it was presumably written—or sung or recited—in about 600 BCE. It expresses the viewpoint of a woman who admires another woman who is in the company of a man:

Like the very gods in my sight is he who  
sits where he can look in your eyes, who listens  
close to you, to hear the soft voice, its sweetness  
murmur in love and

laughter, all for him. But it breaks my spirit;  
underneath my breast all the heart is shaken.  
Let me only glance where you are, the voice dies,  
I can say nothing,

but my lips are stricken to silence, under-  
neath my skin the tenuous flame suffuses;  
nothing shows in front of my eyes, my ears are  
muted in thunder.

And the sweat breaks running upon me, fever  
shakes my body, paler I turn than grass is;  
I can feel that I have been changed, I feel that  
death has come near me. (Lattimore 1960)

This poem's *sounds* to the modern ear like an autobiographical statement yet Charlotte Higgins has recently observed that 'it's important to bear in mind that it would be naive indeed to confuse the poetically constructed "I" of the poems with some objectively clear "real-life" Sappho' (2010: np). Margaret Reynolds, in introducing her edition of Sappho poems and related material, *The Sappho companion*, noted of fragment 31 that:

some critics have put this poem back into Sappho's social context and have suggested that it is an *epithalamium*, a wedding poem designed to be sung during the celebration of a marriage. In this case, the whole poem could be read as an elaborate compliment to the bridegroom who has just acquired a desirable bride (2010: 22).

More generally, Reynolds notes that Sappho's 'body ... her nurturing body-of-work ... is mutilated, in pieces—both actually, in terms of the fragmented works, and metaphorically, in terms of her legendary death, broken on the rocks of the sea'. Reynolds characterises Sappho's attraction for modern readers—given that we know almost nothing about her—in terms of 'a nostalgia and longing that are greater than those directed towards any other object of desire that is present, intact and accessible' (2010: 6). In other words, Sappho has been reconstructed by many contemporary readers, critics and scholars in an image of themselves, almost as if she might be a contemporary of ours who is happy to share her intimate and private experiences with us all.

### 3. An idea of common experience

Why do we want to believe that poets in their work are telling us about their personal lives, about the facts as they were and about their private responses as they were

experienced? Paradoxical as it may sound—given that everyone agrees that human beings experience the world individually and subjectively—many people believe that a significant proportion of their interior lives, personal motives and private experience is held more-or-less in common with others. There is a widespread assumption that as writers remember and narrate what has happened to them—notwithstanding the fact that the details of their lives will be different from the details of other lives—they are able to assert what is exemplary and authentic about human experience.

Further, for many readers, the exemplary, the authentic and what is literally true go together. The logic of this is that the recounting of ‘real’ lived experience matters because it represents, as it were, a reliable testimony about what someone has been through. Many readers believe that such testimony allows them to learn about themselves through making connections with another’s personal history. For such readers, ‘fake’ or invented material can be interpreted as a kind of hoax, a way of saying that the nature of experience is other than any true testimony can prove it to be. In such a context, invented material may be construed as a form of deception, and also as constructing a significant moral and ethical vacuum. The reasoning is that if one accepts the veracity of even one literary invention masquerading as the ‘truth’ then the distinction between the authentic and the fabricated—misleading as it might be—becomes blurred.

This is not simply a reaction to the misrepresentations of autobiographical experience in books such as James Frey’s *A million little pieces* (2003) or Glenn G. Boyer’s fabrication of material in his *I married Wyatt Earp: the recollections of Josephine Sarah Marcus Earp* (1976)—even though these authorial inventions troubled a large number of people. Donna Lee Brien, who discusses the works of Frey and Boyer (2006: 56-59), observes that in contemporary life ‘the reliability of information [is] a highly valued feature for readers of texts of all kinds’ especially because the ‘years of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries’ were characterised by ‘political and social insecurity’. She discusses the information explosion that has accompanied the rise of digital technologies and the fact that many people have become cynical about ‘previously respected sources of information’, stating that as a result ‘consumers of works classified as non-fiction ... [understand] that they will contain reliable—that is, trustworthy—information’ (2006: 55). She concludes that ‘[c]reative nonfiction ... draws its power from the non-fiction truths it tells’ (61).

#### **4. Memory and meaning what you say**

Although Brien’s essay focuses mainly on memoir and creative nonfiction rather than poetry, my discussion has indicated that many readers approach poetry in much the same way as they approach works of creative nonfiction and personal memoir. Problematic as this is, a further complication arises when poets explicitly enter the arena of autobiography and engage ‘with the uses of memory’. When this occurs, readers not only have to consider the artificial and constructed nature of a poet’s work but also to acknowledge that memory itself represents unstable ground for any consideration of the literal truth.

Sigmund Freud observed that ‘the childhood experiences constructed or remembered in analysis are sometimes indisputably false and sometimes equally certainly correct’ (1963: 367) and numerous recent studies of autobiographical memory confirm Freud’s observations. The overwhelming evidence is that nobody remembers their lives or motives accurately. Instead, in memory, a great deal is reconstruction—and much of it tends to be one or other form of self-assertion or self-justification.

For instance, Daniel Albright has disputed the idea that there is a linear set of experiences through which we can narrate our pasts. Instead, he contends that the remembered self is ‘a matrix ramifying backward in all directions, a garden of forking paths that converge in the present’ (1994: 31). Craig Barclay and Thomas Smith have written that ‘[w]e remember for many reasons, not the least of which is to form and carry forward interpersonal relationships and to provide ourselves with a sense of our past in the present. Autobiographical remembering is *being* in the moment’ (2010: 89; emphasis in the original).

The great 19<sup>th</sup>-century New England poet, Emily Dickinson, wrote nearly 1800 poems that were only published in reasonably authoritative texts in 1955. Many of her letters survive but they tend to be oblique, and scant information survives about significant issues relating to her personal life—such as what she thought about her family members; who she loved and in what ways; and even whether she was sexually experienced.

The most compelling body of work she left consists of lyric poems—quite a few of them about memory and the aftermath of crisis. They are riven by a questing uncertainty and are saturated by passionate and highly cerebral observations, perceptions and imagery. The best of the poems are driven by such apparent intensity that many readers want to know more about the person who produced them. How could a 19<sup>th</sup>-century New England spinster recluse have known what she knew?

Recently, Lyndall Gordon (2011) published *Lives like loaded guns: Emily Dickinson and her family’s feuds*, the latest in a line of biographies of Dickinson. Gordon asserts that Dickinson was almost certainly an epileptic. She adduces evidence from Dickinson’s poetry to support this claim—and in order to buttress her reading of Dickinson’s inconclusive medical records and some other documents. Gordon is critical of the standard Dickinson biography published in 1974 by Richard B Sewall, writing that ‘[f]uture readers will be able to judge where Sewall succumbed to the vast trove of [Millicent] Todd untruths’ (2011: 395). However, she shares with Sewall and many other Dickinson critics a willingness to read Dickinson’s poems biographically.

In Gordon’s hands, even that strange and complex poem ‘My Life had stood – a Loaded Gun’ becomes indicative of epilepsy. Here is the full poem:

My Life had stood – a Loaded Gun –  
 In Corners – till a Day  
 The Owner passed – identified –  
 And carried Me away –

And now We roam in Sovereign Woods –

And now We hunt the Doe –  
And every time I speak for Him –  
The Mountains straight reply –

And do I smile, such cordial light  
Opon the Valley glow –  
It is as a Vesuvian face  
Had let it's pleasure through –

And when at Night – Our good Day done –  
I guard My Master's Head –  
'Tis better than the Eider Duck's  
Deep Pillow – to have shared –

To foe of His – I'm deadly foe –  
None stir the second time –  
On whom I lay a Yellow Eye –  
Or an emphatic Thumb –

Though I than He – may longer live  
He longer must – than I –  
For I have but the power to kill,  
Without – the power to die – (Dickinson 1998: 722-23)

Gordon writes that this poem 'turns an explosive sickness ... into well-aimed art' (2011: 136), yet the truth is that no-one knows whether Dickinson was epileptic or the extent to which many of her poems comment on her extended and mysterious periods of ill-health. What we do know is that while this complex poem has provoked many different interpretations—and has often been read as a confessional statement—its persona, and the poem as a whole, is strongly dramatised. The poem may be read as confessional but only by neglecting its artfulness.

Further, although the territory of memory is invoked in the image of 'My Life' as 'a Loaded Gun – / In Corners' it is hard to read this as a literal statement about Dickinson's own life prior to meeting the 'Owner'. The poem is simply too complex and, in any case, the image functions not so much as an autobiographical reference as a way of activating the poem as it moves from a state of passivity into activity. Whatever autobiographical content the poem contains has been transformed and disguised through the poem's narrative development, its elaborate network of imagery and through its use of a persona who is certainly not simply Dickinson herself.

Through pursuing an imaginative adventure 'My Life had stood – a Loaded Gun –' speaks of genuinely complex psychological issues. It explores, among other subjects, a fantasy of wish-fulfillment in which the ego, or 'I' is invulnerable with a simultaneous consideration of the destructive implications of any enactment of such a fantasy—involving, as it would, a narcissistic abdication of moral responsibility. We can all connect with such a poem, not because it reflects Dickinson's autobiographical



experience or contains actual memory material, but because she has made out of the raw material of her life something of grandeur and profundity.

More generally, it is reductive to read any well-made poem that appears to speak confessionally as if that is its primary purpose and a sufficient reason for according it value as a work of art. Rather, poets everywhere continue to use the stuff of their creative imaginations in order to recast and rewrite the autobiographical experiences that inform their poems. They also transform autobiographical memory, fraught as it is with unreliability and composed as it is of absence and amnesia as well as recollection—poets make things up even when they are not aware that they are doing so. Albright writes that ‘it is arguable ... that metaphors are the only proper way to describe the remembered self, since memory itself is only a metaphor’ (1994: 39).

Many of us may be uneasy when writers say ‘I did this’ while failing to tell us the truth but isn’t this one of the main reasons we value art. We do not read poetry, or literature in general, to be told what happened as a kind of accounting. We do so in order to be exposed to life more richly and coherently imagined and understood than it is when we encounter it in our day-to-day existence; and to witness the self and memory remade and reconfigured. We enjoy encountering the literal dressed in metaphor’s disguise, and life restated *as it might have been*.

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