The Gay Self as Myth:
Confessionalism and Myth-Making in Gay Lyric Poetry

J. Neil C. Garcia

Confessionalism is a term commonly ascribed, in hindsight, to the lyric poems of certain American poets from the 1950s and 60s. It is important to note that, as with the "modernists" or the "Romantics" before them, these poets rarely referred to themselves or their writings by this term.[1] In fact, it was not a poet but a critic, M.L. Rosenthal, reviewing the book *Life Studies* by Robert Lowell, who first used the word "confessional" in this way.[2]

Nowadays, critics agree that it may not be possible to attribute confessionalism to any one poet's complete body of work, but only perhaps to certain poems and sequences in his or her oeuvre.

Confessional poetry has been described as evincing three important characteristics: the frank unbosoming of a trauma, the interweaving of private and public knowledges, and the use of an intimate and conversational tone.[3] The first element—anguish—is probably the most crucial. Indeed, the first poets identified with this mode of writing all suffered from a variety of adversities: sad childhoods, dysfunctional family relationships, failed marriages, nervous breakdowns, substance abuse (to name a few). Several factors have been identified by critics that paved the way for the upsurge of confessionalism in American poetry, chiefest of which was the emergence of the psychoanalytic dispensation in the US

by the middle of the twentieth century. The confessionalists shared a kind of spiritual "fellowship" by virtue of this common experience with psychotherapy, but at the same time this "bond" caused them to strive to individuate their styles.

We must understand that America in the mid-twentieth century was engulfed in several serious crises: the Cold War, the nuclear arms race, and the numerous frightening conflicts erupting in various places in the world.[4] At the same time, Americans had never been more economically prosperous in a society that had never been more technologically advanced, and this convergence of unbridled prosperity and imminent threat effectively "fractured" the American psyche. The American individual felt victimized and fragmented by the powerful forces that were beyond his or her control. For many Americans, the arts—in particular, literature—provided a means of restoring a sense of wholeness to the self, for creativity at least represented a form of agency and "meaningful" action. To the young American poets of the 1950s, the confessional poem, nakedly personal, shameless, and introspective, offered a powerful and direct way of countering this personal and cultural upheaval.

Indeed, in the face of the depressing realities of post-War America, the lyric poem, to the confessionalists, was a poignant and memorable way of insisting upon personality and feeling in the matter of artistic composition. Moreover, the attractiveness of confessionalism arguably lay in its ability to neutralize—if not undo—the all-too-harsh credo of "depersonalization," advocated by the "coldly experimental" modernists of the early twentieth century.[5] Instead, the confessionalists sought a more direct inscription of individual perception: no more masks, no more personae—these poets, unapologetically subjective, spoke about and as themselves.[6] Of course, now we know only too well that this so-called "speaking about and as oneself" is itself a dramatic impersonation. Meaning: the poetic persona, even if he or she sounds authentically autobiographical, is finally, all things considered, only a persona. Hence, the self that confesses in lyric poetry is a contrived

character or personality, the product of a series of choices and selections the poet has had to make in the course of seeing his or her poetic vision through to its completion.[7]

Inquiring further into this idea, we may refer ourselves to the poet Sherod Santos, himself often described by critics as a confessional poet, who once clarified in an interview just what he believed to be the most important feature of this mode of writing. He does this by quoting the words of the critic, Irving Howe, who famously declared that the "confessional poem would seem to be one in which the writer speaks to the reader, telling him, without the mediating presence of imagined event or persona, something about his life."[8] The most crucial part of this definition is, for Santos, the word "seem." Indeed, the confessional poem isn't so much a poem in which the poet himself or herself speaks about his or her life, but rather a poem which convinces the readers that it is indeed the poet himself or herself that is speaking about his of her life. Elaborating further, Santos compares confessionalism to the creation of the "illusion of three-dimensional space" by realist painters. Truthfulness in this kind of poetry is not about the truth per se, but rather about an illusion of truth, which the poet creates by speaking candidly about shameful and traumatic experiences.[9]

And so, in actuality, confessional poetry, as written by its best practitioners, is nothing if not the result of masterful *poiesis* or "poem-making." Put in the words of contemporary critical theory, the confessional "I," the anguished self who expresses and unbosoms and confesses, is the performative effect of the repetitive citation of the confessional norm, and it is this very performativity that produces the illusion of autobiographical self-presence.[10] The confessional norm decrees that in this specific register of poetic articulation, the poem is plainly and simply commensurate to the truth. The confessional norm is therefore yet another form of cultural fiction that has assumed the power of myth, and thereby naturalized itself as fact. For the truth of the matter is that even the "master" confessional poets lied in their poems—lied in ways readers can never be entirely certain of.

Now and again, during rare moments of candor, confessional poets do tell the truth. Sexton in an interview once revealed that she had lied about having only one child in a couple of poems, and that the brother she had referred to in other poems never in fact existed,[11] and Lowell also admitted that he had "tinkered" around with the so-called "facts" in his famous collection, *Life Studies*.[12] When asked on a radio poetry show, Sylvia Plath unblinkingly admitted to inventing characters and speakers in a number of her poems.[13] More recently, the poet Diane Wakoski took umbrage when someone in the audience praised her for her courage, after she had read from her collection of intimate-sounding poems: not in so many words, Wakoski reminded her listeners and readers that the "I" who speaks in her poems is not her, but rather a product of her artistic decisions—which is to say, the "I" in her work is nothing if not "her own special creation."[14] And then, there's the notorious Sharon Olds, whose many frank and oftentimes scandalous poems about her first sexual experience can easily prompt the regular reader of her works to realize the excessive fictiveness of just these same "confessions."[15] To repeat the much belabored but crucial point: confessionalism in lyric poetry is not a function of experiential accuracy but rather of the artistically realized simulation of the supposedly faithful relationship between life and art.

Any one poet will have any number of confessional poems. However, in the case of the more famous confessionalists of the 1950s and 60s—John Berryman, Plath, and Sexton—it is the consistency, in poem after poem, of the confessional tone and the confessional style that invests these otherwise contrived texts with an authentically immediate and confessional personality. Thus, reading the respective poems of these poets, one gets the idea of a selfsame speaking subject, whose speech comes across as an unmediated articulation of a deeply personal truth. These poets wrote so consistently and so astonishingly in this mode that every other poem they wrote has thereafter been taken as confessional by their readers. Indeed, they have created such powerful personal fictions—myths—of themselves through their poems, that rarely are these poems perceived as being anything but truthful. [16] The myth of the gay confessional self may be seen,

like other contemporary myths, as a kind of "hierophany,"[17] an enabling (because inspiring) narrative that infuses gay existence with meaning and thereby champions it against the prejudice to which it is normally subjected.

In terms of style, we must add that the confessionalists mostly wrote their lyrics in free verse, although some, like Berryman and Lowell, initially worked with traditional forms, perhaps as a way of imposing regularity on the chaos of their inner lives.[18] But they also ended up joining their peers in pain and moved into looser forms, shedding off traditional symbolism and incorporating everyday speech in order to more seamlessly allow the reader to enter their private worlds. We must, however, remember that the best of them did become masters of "the sullen craft," skillfully wielding the line and the stanza to impart the illusion of pure and unbridled feeling.

To summarize, then: we can say that what makes lyric poetry confessional is both the subject (something private and painful), and its treatment (seemingly frankly personal and intimate, conversational, and authentic-sounding.) This casualness of tone causes the reader to believe that the confessional poem is an honest self-revelation. Here we need to remember that, ultimately, the effectiveness of confessionalism as a poetic mode arguably lies in the lyric form itself. The lyric has been called the "genre of the private life," a form of personal meditation that is always situated in the "here and now"—written as though it were meant to be spoken by the reader.[19] When we read the text of a lyric poem it is as if we were the one actually uttering the words. This peculiar characteristic of the lyric form makes it the most intimate and "universal" of literary genres, for in effect it facilitates a "oneness" between the poet and his or her reader: the lyric poem presumes that writer and reader resemble each other—at least, resemble each other enough, so that the latter can assume the identity of and "become" the former. Confessional poems, because they are lyric poems, become all the more compelling, not the least because of the "honesty" and "urgency" of their subject matter and of their manners of expression.

As announced in my title, my task this afternoon is to propose possible contact zones between confessionalism and gay poetry. To the degree that a confessional poem unbosoms a painful truth, then we can say that gay poems are already, by definition, confessional: whatever else it does, a gay poem confesses what continues to be a difficult and shameful truth—in our homophobic world, a most troubling "homosexual truth"—about its creator. The literary rendering of gayness or homosexuality in a gay poet's poems is similar to the issue of gender—and to the "gendering," by feminist authors, of their own literary productions. Briefy, I shall now be turning to the subject of gender and sexuality in poetic creativity, in order to complicate the idea of confessionalism, particularly confessionalism written in the service of gay poetry's inescapably myth-making interest.

It is clear that the author, in particular the poet, could only be benefited if he or she turned a little more interested in articulating gender as a crucial aspect in his or her writings. In the first place, it is the poet's duty to humanity to try to help improve the unequal status of women vis-a-vis the men. Secondly, any piece of writing is already gendered anyway, and hence, the knowledge of how this process of engenderment is carried out in one's poetic craft represents a way to control and enrich one's poetry—and one's consciousness—through one's poetic productions. Moreover, gender describes a distinction that can be the source of so much insightful wealth within the poem or indeed any kind of text: being the marker of difference, it can lead the reader to a fuller appreciation of the writer's experience or whatever it is that he or she wants to say. And lastly, the poet will only benefit from a knowledge of gender relations and their influence on him or her because with such a knowledge, he or she can now begin to focus on the forms of experience—those polymorphously delirious desires and feelings—unique to his or her gender, which are things precious and special in themselves, because they provide other opportunities to partake of the many fullnesses and beauties of life.

On the other hand, the question of gayness, indeed, the question of sexuality, is arguably another, altogether

uncomfortable thing. Given the ascendancy of the feminist kind of political correctness in our times, many of us will find it a perfectly laudable task to "en-gender"—that is to say, to masculinize or feminize—our writings. However, we must also admit that only perhaps the most big-hearted of us will not be loath to extend the corresponding open-mindedness as far as the subject of sexuality is concerned. I can perhaps personalize the issue by posing the all-important question this way: Just how beneficial has the activity of sex-ing my poetry—that is to say, making it resonate the concerns of homo/hetero/bisexualities—been, in my case?

Obviously, coming out as a homosexual—whether one is a poet or not—is the most politic thing one can do, should one be gay. In the first place, gayness is a political position in itself, and coming out is just about the only way it can be defended and advocated. Moreover, there is nothing wrong about homosexuality anyway, and like femaleness, it describes an index of experiential difference that in and of itself contains so much "gorgeousness," which otherwise remains neglected and unappreciated. Despite this apologia, however, there remains that doubt lingering somewhere in my sentient body of whether it has ultimately served me well to have come out as a gay writer—or to have made my homosexuality conscious in my literary productions. I, for one, understand that this uncertainty can only exist in the case of the gay writer—and not of the heterosexual writer, whether male or female—simply because the truth of the matter is: gender is not sexuality.

It is scarcely doubted that one is male or female. Gender distinctions are simply unavoidable and self-evident in our everyday life. In light of this discussion, this means that any given poet's work can only be received either as a work written by a man or as a work written by a woman. The issue of sexuality, on the other hand, is more difficult to address, and perhaps even understand. In the first place, the distinctions of sexuality are really distinctions of sexual orientation: homo, hetero, bi. This being the case, one's sexuality isn't as immanent or inarguable as one's gender in relation to one's identity. Gender defines

identity more seamlessly than sexuality does, if only because it is built upon the body, which is already indelibly marked by the physical difference of biological sex.[20] Sexual orientation and desire, on the other hand, are less easy to attribute to one to the degree that they are not inscribed on the body but are rather incumbent upon what this body *does* and *feels*.

Because sexuality is not as easy to identify as gender, there is a need to declare it in ways different (because more categorically insistent) from the ways gender is normally indicated and inscribed in literary works: through language, representations, and politics. In my case, for instance: unlike the generations of closeted gay writers before me, I have needed to thematize homosexuality directly and unmistakably in order to cause it to exist in my writings. In a way, this means that writing gay texts needs to assume the character of a public and "myth-making" activity at the very outset, in order to even begin to inaugurate its own space within the dominant heterosexual discourse. Read: without the grand gesture and blatant pigheadedness of spelling out a character's sexual orientation in a story, this character will necessarily be perceived as a heterosexual.

What this simply means is that as a gay poet I cannot really rely on the reader's commonsense knowledge of my (or perhaps his or her own) sexuality. I cannot assume that the reader will understand that it is a gay person speaking in my poem. I will therefore have to find a way to declare it, indeed to "confess" it more clearly—and hopefully, more beautifully—to the reader. On the other hand, this declaration need not be done if the text is itself about the homosexual experience—in which case the drama of events encoded in the text itself drives home the point of its sexuality and politics. But if the poem is not about homoeroticism or anything identifiably gay in the first place, the problem arises of how to sex(ualize) the piece. It is therefore readily noticeable and scarcely doubted that the same problem doesn't arise in the case of gender: just by the use of pronouns alone—or just by virtue of the fact that the author's name is already (no matter how vaguely) indicative of his or her gender—the text is already

identified as representing and therefore furthering a certain gender/gender position. In the case of sexuality, however, this is not as simple.

Allow me to elaborate. I have written a number of love poems, the gender of whose speakers as well as their objects of desire is not specified in the text of the poems themselves. And here is where the question of confessionalism in gay poetry becomes slightly more vexed and vexing: the private and shameful truth being confessed—just now I realize the appropriateness of the word, in relation to the homosexual subject—by the gay poet cannot be confined to any particular text, for in our altogether malicious and sexually minded world, sexuality (especially, homosexuality) once avowed cannot be entirely disavowed anymore. Evidently, then, for the self-consciously gay poet, his non-normative sexuality inheres not just in particular poems or sequences of poems but rather in his oeuvre, or even in his very being, in its entirety.

Not that I would ever like it to be otherwise, for myself. While I would like to believe that the ungendered personae in many of my love poems all speak from the homosexual position, I must admit that, most of the time, there is nothing in the poems per se that suggests this in the very least. In fact, had these love poems not come out in any of my six avowedly gay collections, these various lovelorn personae—many of whom wear the masks of mythological characters, mostly goddesses and heroines—would have never struck the reader to be gay at all. But if one asks me about it, I'll readily say that these love poems are gay poems because I, a gay poet, wrote them, and because their sentiments concerning what may strictly be a universal issue proceeds from the gay subject-position nevertheless. Herein lies the crucial point in this part of my presentation, thus: the gayness of a confessional gay poem lies not in its formal linguistic features alone—or even in its subject matter, its characters and representations—but rather, in the politics and rituals of interpretation that are ultimately brought to bear on it. In other words: it may well be that the only truly viable and artistic option for the gay poet is to invest his necessarily confessional poems

with a socially recognizable, psychically resonant, and collectively "mythic" quality—a task he can accomplish, as he very soon discovers, both in word and in deed.

In order to instate the "truthfulness" of my poems' "gayness," I have needed to construct my own special fiction—my public persona or personal myth—of a gay self. In other words, in my career as a gay poet, I quickly realized, even in the beginning, that I would need to profess and perform my gayness not just in my poems, but also in all sorts of un-poetic, extra-writerly ways. I've had to give talks like this, teach a gay literature course, read my poems at LGBT events, and basically do all sorts of strange and compromising things I could never imagine I'd someday do when I was just a tantrummy, dreamy-eyed, and decidedly "odd" child. It has also been necessary to package my poems as gay: to make gayness their singularly obsessive theme; in other words, to render gayness into a politics that is central to my poetics. Needless to say, all these things I did and continue to do not only for the sake of affirmative "gay myth-making," but also to get the interpretive process of reading gayness into my works well and firmly underway. And all these extra-literary acts can qualitatively be described as mythic acts of self-avowal—in other words, acts of Coming Out.

Why have I taken all the trouble? is a question that hounds me still. I know that there are so many gays who write and are even at the topmost rung of the ladder of canonical writers in Philippine literature, even as or precisely because they never exerted any effort to make their gayness available in their texts, or to render their homosexuality central to their literary crafts. Are they the happier or better off than me for choosing to do this?

I will not be able to give any confident answer to this question short of lying through my teeth, but perhaps I need to remind myself that sexuality isn't all that "artificial" an aspect in my—or perhaps, in any homosexual person's—life. In fact, sexuality exists in a centrally paradoxical, uncertain location within the social sphere: it is relatively easy to miss sexuality in our

reading or writing because it isn't as obtrusive as the other distinctions of identity (like class, race, gender, and ethnicity); but at the same time, sex/uality describes a vital and most fundamental truth about ourselves. For me, in specific: my homosexuality has never, for one second, struck me as immaterial and inconsequential to my very being inasmuch as everywhere I look, whatever I do, whomever I speak with, everywhere I go, I am reminded of the unlawfulness of my desire, of the demonic difference ascribed to me by my sexuality. And precisely because sexuality has been hammered into me by every single entity, every single experience, every single text, every single object in my culture, I cannot stop being aware that I am a homosexual without at the same time ceasing to exist. In no uncertain terms, I realize that I couldn't have written except as a homosexual. Another way of saying this is that I couldn't have begun to write except about and through my homosexuality. (Needless to say, being the undeniable sissy that I always was, the choice to do otherwise was, apparently, never available in my case.)

Once again, the question arises: Why is it necessary and desirable for a poet or any kind of writer to be conscious of sexuality when he or she writes? The answer is simple: To not seriously consider sexual orientation in one's writing is to unwittingly inscribe heterosexuality in one's work and therefore to assume its "natural" superiority over all the other forms of desire. A writer who isn't conscious of the issue of sexual oppression is necessarily abetting and/or endorsing its oppressiveness. And of course, the oppressively funny thing is that the question of whether or not writing must exhibit sexual awareness no longer crops up for the gay writer who can only be aware of it if he has to live or write at all. Moreover, the gay poet must not just make sure that he has written his homosexuality into his texts, but also that the interpretations his readers will bring to bear on his poems remain cognizant of their maker's (which is to say, his own) sexual politics.

It has been necessary for me, as a poet, to insist on the gayness of my poems—through the single-minded creation and insistent performance of a mythic gay lyric self—because to fail to

locate it in them would be to miss their "essence." While I am aware that there are poems of mine which can be read in both gay and non-gay ways, the point I am trying to raise here, nevertheless, is this: the experiences that occasioned all my poems were and could only be gay. I long ago decided that this (gay) specificity of my experience and subjectivity needs to be accepted and respected by my reader or else he or she is cheating my poems of their meaning. Indeed, for the self-affirming gay poet who wishes to make his gayness central to his work, the activity of writing should always be a matter of self-disclosure: for such a person, writing should always be a part of a bigger political commitment to own up to the consequences of his own utterance. Seen from this perspective, any self-respecting interpretation and/or "reception" of his text will never be able to lose sight of the agonistic politics behind its writing, and will therefore accordingly be informed by this piece of fabulous and strangely liberating knowledge.

On the other hand, other than through the issue of "Coming Out," the question of myth-making and gay confessionalism proves itself salient in another way. And this is precisely how: because gayness is a "truth" that, once confessed in one's poetry (and, consequently, in one's public "selfhood"), can never again be disowned—for it inflects or "colors" every other text one composes henceforth—strangely enough by this very same token the gay confessional poet need not ever be confined in any one register of poetic articulation. What I mean here is that the avowed gay poet is not required to write in the monotonous language of the autobiographical "I," despite or precisely because of the necessarily confessional nature of his writings. One of the more interesting confessional modes that have surfaced in recent years involves the interweaving of the private and the public—which is to say, of the personal and the mythical—in a lyric poet's poems or, very often, series of poems.

I am speaking of the particular lyric form called the lyric sequence, and all the wonderful ways contemporary confessional poets have appropriated it. The lyric sequence is an ordered gathering of lyrics, or a lyric poem written *in extenso*. This formal

characteristic allows each poetic unit or segment in a lyric sequence to exist independently, at the same time that they individually and collectively participate in a larger project. The complexity of the lyric sequence derives, in a fundamental sense, from the paradoxical nature of its form or structure: the lyric sequence is at once whole and fragmentary, at once continuous and discontinuous, at once one poem and many poems, at once lyrical and narrative, at once a vertical (metaphorical) meditation on a single moment, and a horizontal (metonymic) movement across many moments.[21] And so, because of its extended and complex nature, critics have often commented that the lyric sequence is to poetry, as tragedy is to drama, and the novel is to fiction. The contemporary lyric sequence is, itself, the contemporary lyric poem writ large, and its complexity derives from the fact that its structures and parts work in the same unpredictable way that shifts of tone and intensities may be said to work in the modern lyric poem per se.

The American poet whose work I always hold up as an exemplar of the confessional lyric sequence is Louise Glück. Throughout the different and related projects of *Ararat, The Wild Iris, Meadowlands, Vita Nova, The Seven Ages,* and her latest book *Averno*, Glück has expertly demonstrated the thrilling and abundant potentialities of the sequence as a contemporary lyric medium. And yet, in all these books, what perhaps serves as a unifying structure is the poet's own declared metronomic oscillation between "anecdote" and "commentary"—that is to say, between the confessional telling of personal experience, and its intelligent reworking or "reordering," using the "chastening" methods of art.[22] In my view, looking closely at Glück's work, the former impulse refers to her work's unabashed confessional content (which links her up with the tradition of feminist "testimonial" poetry), and the latter, thus far, has referred to "mythopoetic retelling"—an activity she is evidently fond of, and which she is often inclined to perform, alongside her confessional "decantings of personality."

To be more specific, in *The Wild Iris*,[23] we have a sequence that is amazingly dramatic (even theatrical) in its design. In this Pulitzer-prizewinning book, the poems trace a cycle that begins

in spring and ends in autumn, inasmuch as the different speakers in it are the different flowering plants, which awaken and sleep in the primordial garden, and address the human or divine presence tending to them. Even God speaks to his creation as different qualities of light. Occasionally the gardener, who's a wife and an artist (and whom Glück's faithful readers, familiar with the vaunted myth of her wry and intelligent personality, may justifiably equate with the poet's own dramatic and autobiographical "self"), also speaks, and what's interesting is her speech partakes of the same rhapsodic swings between anguish and bliss, which the whole verdant world and God himself intone. All this happens as the seasons, like life itself, begin to wax and to wane.

The astonishment here is that the dramatis personae of this archetypal play (set as it marvelously is in the archetypal garden of humanity's twin destinies of desire and terror) are indeed all these different characters, and yet, throughout the sequence, the lyric voice is undeniably single and singular. If we have to think of this sequence as a play at all, then it will have to be one of those avant-garde, one-woman, "interpretative" kinds of play, in which a single actor speaks all the speaking parts, wears the mask of all the perspectives, emotes all the psychological stances and movements, and performs all the stylistic and verbal shifts, of the script she is reading (these movements are, in fact, characteristics of the contemporary lyric poem itself.) All told, the poems in *The Wild Iris* do not constitute a dramatic monologue, but rather, a series of dramatic monologues, unified by the person (or more precisely, persona) of the poet, who speaks them out of a felt and fully confident (some critics have been known to exclaim "oracular," "clairvoyant," or even "hieratic") psychological imperative, a certain "urgency of utterance," an emotional vortex or core that both grounds the sequence and propels its serial pieces outward—that is to say, gives the entire work tension and yet, finally, controls the associative articulations of its various lyric segments, and coalesces them into a single provisional vision or theme.

Let me now read a smattering of these amazing poems, in order to demonstrate the wonderful affordances of the

sequence form, especially in relation to the confessionalist imperative.

First, a poem spoken by one of the flowers:

Daisies[24]

Go ahead: say what you're thinking. The garden
is not the real world. Machines
are the real world. Say frankly what any fool
could read in your face: it makes sense
to avoid us, to resist
nostalgia. It is
not modern enough, the sound the wind makes
stirring a meadow of daisies: the mind
cannot shine following it. And the mind
wants to shine, and not
grow deep, as, for example, roots. It is very touching,
all the same, to see you cautiously
approaching the meadow's border in early morning,
when no one could possibly
be watching you. The longer you stand at the edge,
the more nervous you seem. No one wants to hear
impressions of the natural world: you will be
laughed at again; scorn will be piled on you.
As for what you're actually
hearing this morning: think twice
before you tell anyone what was said in this field
and by whom.

Next, two poems spoken by the poet-gardener (we can tell it is she, the human agency, who speaks because the title is that of a kind of prayer—for instance, "Matins" or "Vespers"). The first is addressed to nobody in particular. The second, like a number of other lyrics in this sequence, is addressed to the third character in this mythic drama, who is God.

Matins[25]

The sun shines; by the mailbox, leaves
of the divided birch tree folded, pleated like fins.
Underneath, hollow stems of the white daffodils,
Ice Wings, Cantatrice; dark
leaves of the wild violet. Noah says
depressives hate the spring, imbalance
between the inner and the outer world. I make
another case—being depressed, yes, but in a sense
passionately
attached to the living tree, my body
actually curled in the split trunk, almost at peace,
in the evening rain
almost able to feel
sap frothing and rising: Noah says this is
an error of depressives, identifying
with a tree, whereas the happy heart
wanders the garden like a falling leaf, a figure for
the part, not the whole.

Vespers[26]

In your extended absence, you permit me
use of earth, anticipating
some return on investment. I must report
failure in my assignment, principally
regarding the tomato plants.
I think I should not be encouraged to grow
tomatoes. Or, if I am, you should withhold
the heavy rains, the cold nights that come
so often here, while other regions get
twelve weeks of summer. All this
belongs to you: on the other hand,
I planted the seeds, I watched the first shoots
like wings tearing the soil, and it was my heart
broken by the blight, the black spot so quickly

multiplying in the rows. I doubt
you have a heart, in our understanding of
that term. You who do not discriminate'
between the dead and the living, who are, in
consequence,
immune to foreshadowing, you may not know
how much terror we bear, the spotted leaf,
the red leaves of the maple falling
even in August, in early darkness: I am responsible
for these vines.

And now, God (the signal is the title, which refers to light or the passing seasons themselves):

Early Darkness[27]

How can you say
earth should give me joy? Each thing
born is my burden; I cannot succeed
with all of you.

And you would like to dictate to me,
you would like to tell me
who among you is most valuable,
who most resembles me.
And you hold up as an example
the pure life, the detachment
you struggle to achieve—

How can you understand me
when you cannot understand yourselves?
Your memory is not
powerful enough, it will not
reach back far enough—

Never forget you are my children—
You are not suffering because you touched each other

but because you were born,
because you required life
separate from me.

The Wild Iris is Glück's attempt to confess, in astonishing mythic terms, pieces of her troubled life (for instance, her clinical depression, and her complicated relationship with her emotionally distant son Noah and husband John) at the same time that she articulates and reflects upon—in other words, in keeping with the tradition of this form, to "work out"—within the frame of her archetypal drama, and throughout the entire breadth and "breath" of this particular sequence, the imponderable and age-old questions of existence: Why are we here? Why must we strive for meaning when death awaits us all? How can human happiness be possible in the face of humanity's mortal fate? Why does God allow his own creation to suffer decline and obsolescence? What consolation can perishable beauty—or even love—give us? By using the mythic frame of the Garden, and by projecting her voice both inward and outward—towards the suffering female self, towards the moieties of a beleaguered creation, and towards the "incomprehensible" divine providence that animates and mercifully sustains it—Glück is able to transfigure and temper the famously autobiographical content of her poems with intelligence, inasmuch as this mythic frame transforms the personal and individual life into a psychological and spiritual paradigm, from which she, as poet, could subsequently aesthetically distance herself, and on which she can freely and deeply reflect. Indeed, in her many sequences, Glück traverses what she believes to be the essential journey of all poetry: a thoughtful movement between the "origin" of experience, and the ultimate destination, which is illumination (also called—she memorably insists—"truth"). Everywhere in between are the series and networks of artistic decisions, which in this case constitute the form and substance of the sequence itself.

Of all her contemporaries, Glück has, in my opinion, succeeded the most in fully exploring the complexity of both confessionalism and the sequence form, by marshalling the powers of these poetic modes in the service of a selfconsciously myth-

making and mythopoetic project. In all her book-length cycles, she has rendered individual poems both unified and fragmentary, and has made optimal dramatic use of the lyric sequence's narrative movement (in other words, its sequentiality). This is not to say she doesn't introduce variety to this form, for indeed she now and then improvises in her sequences, and provides "philosophical" pauses in the form of poems that break and sometimes "trouble" the narrative and dramatic logic of the extended work (and yet, by resonating its inner themes, they finally, still and all, help it along). By intermeshing mythic commentary and personal "truth-telling," she has also, in effect, rescued confessional poetry from the morass of reckless self-indulgence, psychosomatic exhibitionism, and sadomasochistic egotism. Moreover, by brazenly employing statements—always gracefully poised, rhetorically forceful, and memorable—Glück possibly harks back (at least, in my view) to the Renaissance procedure of argument, bringing the exigencies of the present to bear on this time-tested but increasingly overlooked method by which poetry may be seen to unfold itself.

* * *

A gay poet is a confessional poet to the degree that the difficult but also triumphant and joyous truth of his non-normative sexuality functions as a central defining attribute of his consciousness and it products. And yet, coming out as a gay poet entails the creation of a powerful social fiction of non-normative sexual subjectivity—a gay mythic self—which, once avowed, can never be neglected or disavowed anymore. Any other text he writes can only be gay, inflected from this political act of self-affirmation, be it about—as the poems I will be reading at the end of this talk should show—the mysteries of the Holy Rosary or the Beslan massacre in southern Russia, or the retelling of the Edenic story of the Fall, or yes, the account of sadomasochistic gay sex that takes place in certain institutional spaces in Amsterdam, as such an intriguing thing is experienced by a Filipino gay tourist.

Because this is supposed to be a "craft lecture," I suppose I am finally irrevocably tasked to speak about my own poetic practice, in view of the foregoing discussion on the uses of myth in gay confessional lyrics (which in my case have indeed sometimes taken the shape of cycles or sequences). My experience with the lyric sequence goes way back: the first time I started to write poetry seriously (in high school), I would now and then compose "serial poems," to which I would give titles, but which I would also number, say 1 to 5 (or sometimes, even 10). Back then, I probably already recognized the inability of a singular poetic text to exhaust one's vision—at times. Even then, I probably hankered for the kind of linguistic and imaginative space the sequence could offer me, within which I could, hopefully, more fully—or at least, satisfyingly—explore a poetic moment or even just an inspiration.

In my first two books of gay poetry, *Closet Quivers* and *Our Lady of the Carnival*, I remember including these light-hearted little sequences—in the former about hens and kittens, in the latter about a gay beautician, who flirts with his handsome male clients, but finally ends up feeling put down by the oppressive hierarchy that exists between him and the "real man," with whom he is slavishly fascinated. However, it was only in my third book, *The Sorrows of Water*, that I finally wrote an earnest seven-part sequence—a "cycle" of love poems called "Gift," all of which are spoken by a mythic abandoned lover (a kind of woebegone Orpheus), who is quite fond of the ocean, and wistfully sees in it a metaphor for the boundlessness and sadness of all love. This very personal sequence attempts to examine and address the essential question of solitude, and its relationship to our experiences of all-consuming passion and desire.

It was in my fourth book, however, where I dared to fully explore the sequence form, this time about a personal adversity (my near-fatal injury and my father's sickness and death), framed from a mythic perspective concerning the truth of the soul. This was how I described this project in an essay[28] that I wrote around the time the book came out (back in 2001):

In *Kaluluwa*, the poems are sequentially arranged, all told. They are numbered one to sixty, and read in that order the poems are supposed to grow, by lyric fits and starts, from one frame of mind to another. This structure means to mimic, to run parallel the persona's growing realization of mortality, and the soul's certain exemption from it.

In poem after poem, the self-as-body gets to explore the permutations of feeling, and to assume varying attitudes, as regards its relationship to its soul: awe, envy, hatred, sadness, love, pain, sorrow and finally, a resigned and amiable kind of peace. The persona also identifies himself with a gamut of roles vis-a-vis the cherished object of his attention: child, parent, lover, friend, "fellow-feeler," enemy, companion, and quite interestingly, creator and creature.

These movements are necessary, I suppose, since they depict the body as the soul's Other—which is to say, as the definitive boundary which surrounds and enfolds the soul, and gives it specificity and shape. Nonetheless, the binary nature of this exclusion redounds, the way all binaries do, to a deconstructive logic. This logic effectively dissolves both terms by implicating—by centrally locating—one in the very heart of the other. In a particularly prescient moment, the persona "understands" that he and his soul are one: in trying to visualize how it might look like, what keeps rising in his mind is his own "foreseeable shape"…

The conclusion of *Kaluluwa* may be seen as a mythic dissolution of the fictive and provisional boundary dividing body and soul: because the body is the soul's memory and form, and because

> the soul is the body's animating principle, both body and soul are revealed as mutually dependent terms, alternating moments in the same reality, movements in the same grand symphony. One cannot exist without the other: one is already, from the very beginning, outside as well as inside the other. Even if the soul is supposed to live past the body, we cannot imagine how it can be completely divested of the qualities of the body—shape, heft, sound, and all the dearest rest—without at the same time losing its identity, and ceasing to be this particular soul.
>
> What makes this collection different, from any of my previous books, is precisely the a priori sense of structure—one I was conscious of from the very start—within which the poems took form. In other words, even before I wrote the poems of *Kaluluwa*, I had a sense of how they were going to fit into each other, what "story" they were collectively going to tell. It's almost like, at the outset, I could already intuit the shape and breadth of the forest, even as admittedly I had no way of seeing any of its trees.

There are two sequences in my latest book, *Misterios*, which I wrote in Amsterdam. I remember writing them alongside each other, in a kind of desperate linguistic frenzy. (I wrote something like 90 poems during my four-month stay in that wonderfully strange, perverse, and cold northern European city!)

Just now I'm thinking that, probably, the most interesting thing about these sequences is how "verbally different" from each other they are. The pieces in "Poems from Amsterdam" are glibly autobiographical, confessional, and generative, cataloguing new objects and realities in juxtaposition to the missed objects and realities of "home" (which isn't, surprisingly enough, so much the Philippines, as the "lost paradise" of my—and, possibly, all our—childhoods). I suppose I can attribute this linguistic ebullience to

the fact that I was "confessing" the poems assertively and defensively, given the slow erosion and erasure of my beleaguered "sense of self," to which my temporary but harrowing exile subjected it.

On the other hand, the second sequence in *Misterios* (which is my own retellings of the mysteries of the Rosary), is written in exactly the opposite register: the language of these poems is noticeably spare, austere, chastened—whittled down, it would appear, almost to the point of naked argument or statement. I'm thinking the reason for this discrepancy is that the mythic stories these poems sought to retell were already my own (and everybody else's), are already much too well-known—already much too told and retold—so that there was really no point narrating them again. Writing these poems I knew there was nothing more to be gained from re-describing or re-imaging these "naturalized" and devotional stories! It occurred to me that the point of retelling such cherished myths is in fact to get to the heart of these "mysteries" themselves, and to dis- and thereafter re-articulate them for whatever offhand and marvelous wisdom they might still be keeping. And then, since I was writing these sequences side by side, it's perfectly possible I simply needed this kind of stark expressivity, just as a form of respite from its denser, more voluble counterpart.

If I have to locate the conceptual centers of both sequences, I'd have to say it probably has something to do with the mystery and the mythology of "Self" and "Other." In my humble opinion, in the Amsterdam series, this binary is construed both in personal and sociological terms. The persona participates in several narratives, each presenting him with an experience of Otherness: his childhood, his failed romance, his own lamentable country, his linguistic and cultural splitness, his present estrangement in this very strange city smack in the crotch of the indifferent First World. In "Misterios," the Self is Mary, the all-too-human player in this sacred and mythological drama, and her "Terrible Other" is God, who arguably loves her and yet "takes her childhood away."

I find it all very surprising now, but it strikes me, reading these sequences at a palpable remove from the "scene" of their writing, that while no true and confident resolution to these oppositionalities gets offered by them (for such is impossible, given the inescapable dualisms attending our corporeality), by the end of "Poems from Amsterdam" and "Misterios" a kind of rapprochement is arrived at, if only provisionally. And the astonishing thing is that, in the case of both sequences, this point of confluence or "middle ground" is the mythic insight on the irrefutable and inalienable experience of matter, and of the body that is the ground of our being in—and our singular claim to—this world.

Allow me to read poems from my lyric sequences "Kaluluwa," "Poems from Amsterdam," and "Misterios." To my mind fictive and inventive and yet confessionally gay, these pieces can hopefully demonstrate for you today the fruitful convergence of the mythic and the autobiographical, as far as my own modest efforts at gay lyric poetry are concerned.

From "Kaluluwa"[29]

XLV

I have no children, will have no children,
and so, my end is real
more real, perhaps, than most:

I cannot endure even as a nose,
a slant of eye, an awkward gait
borne by strangers I should have liked to meet

but never will.
It is, you see, a choice,
this self-decrepitude, this bleak refusal

to perpetuate my residue
inside another person's skin.
Not like filial love:

the link of blood between parent and child
is never freely yoked, is tightened
from the start

by brute causality
you must love me, the father shouts,
for you are just my son.

How true, the son uncurls
from his fetal pose, strokes back
his crumpled skin in place. In this way

does he get roughhoused, all his life,
into this forced agreement:
prison of the generated flesh.

It is true he owes his all
to that reproachful voice,
and must receive with calm the blows and kicks

and blunt indifference that sling his way.
I must believe love is possible
without such things,

for look, within this speech,
at you and me:
I love you not because you caused me

but because I choose to.
I must believe at times you choose
to love me, too.

From "Poems from Amsterdam"[30]

XXXIV

When will it ever end—
the strangeness to write about?

The apartment I stay in
is next door to the Black Tulip:

an exclusive guesthouse
for clients into leather and chain.

In other words: bondage,
and all the gory theater it entails.

I've had half-a-mind to go visit
as next-door neighbors are supposed to,

but with pleasure and pain
I'm already fully acquainted,

and for the inflictions of felt language
I no longer have to pay.

At least, not in hard currency.
But I can imagine

how comparable they are—
writing and sadomasochistic sex:

they are both peak experiences
that blur body and spirit,

pushing one into the other's
transforming embrace.

This may be why desire's idiom
approaches the idiom of death:

to be breathless, to know passion,
to be utterly consumed.

Or perhaps, I'm only being analogical,
wishing to see kinship

from the sympathy of distance.
Perhaps, it's not as I think it is.

The metaphor of the suffering self
can be stretched just so far:

wheals and bruises on an exposed flank
are too literal to be abstracted

to a verbal device.
The burning of lashed leather

on a buttock or a thigh
is irreducibly what it is.

Drawn blood from a pricked nipple
isn't quite inspiration.

As I write this, into the courtyard
outside my window waft
muffled moaning and screams
counterpointed by the deliberate sound

of hard, rhythmic spanking.
I can see a fat belt slapping

against a rippled expanse of skin,
freckled and progressively shading

into deeper moods of red.

My mouth waters

at the remembered sensation
of a splintered finger, a stubbed toe,

the waves of dark heat cresting
from the body's midpoint

to the quickening head;
which reels and unhinges

and throbs into a flower—
a tulip blossoming

on the whiteness of the page.

From "Misterios"[313]

The Annunciation

Morning, or early dusk. That line where things
leave their borders, dissolve into darkness
and light.

She is only a girl. She finds herself
lost inside the temple his words hollow
into the cooler side of day.

Her voice inside it croons like distant thunder.
And what it says is, Come in.

She is surprised at her candor, the force
of her own little-known conviction.
He tells her she is chosen,
in this way he raises her

above the mortal, gives her
an awesome gift, leaves her little room
for doubt, or for pleasure. She is, to be honest,
struck dumb with terror,
which she recognizes is also a form of religious assent.

What does it mean, after all,
the Yes she mutters above the angel's bright call?
She is young, her life has yet to happen
in any real sense.

In the meantime the warmth of his eyes becomes
the warmth of her own prone body,
spreading from the tips of his voice
to her inmost skin.

What does it mean to be told God loves you,
at the same time he takes your childhood away?

Notes

[1] W. D. Snodgrass, for example, in an interview, refused to be subsumed under this category. See his interview with Hilary Holladay, "The Original Confessional Poet Tells All," http://www.poetryfoundation.org/article/181671 (accessed 12 January 2009).

[2] Glossary of Poetic Terms: Confessional Poetry, Poetry Foundation, http://www.poetryfoundation.org/learning/glossary-term/Confessional%20poetry (accessed 06 February 2009).

[3] Lucy Collins, "Confessionalism," *A Companion to Twentieth-Century Poetry,* ed. Neil Roberts (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2001), 197-208. I draw mostly from this article by Collins in summarizing the key features of the confessional form.

[4] Collins, 200.

[5] Collins, 205.

[6] A Brief Guide to Confessional Poetry, Poets.org, http://www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/5650 (accessed 19 January 2009).

[7] Persona is the term used to refer to the speaker in a poem. And a persona is always, finally, fictive. See Glossary: Persona, The Poetry Archive,http://www.poetryarchive.org/poetryarchive/glossaryItem.do?id=8086 (accessed 12 February 2009).

[9] Francis L. Martinez, "The No-Face Man and Other Poems," MA thesis in Creative Writing, University of the Philippines Diliman (March 2006), 29.

[10] We owe the theory of performativity, of course, to Judith Butler, who spelled it out so compellingly in the early 90s, and by doing so, definitively shifted the paradigm of feminist and queer studies away from essentialism altogether. See Judith Butler*, Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

[11] R. J. McCaffery, "A Certain Sense of Order: Confessionalism and Anne Sexton's Poetry," http://www.contemporarypoetry.com/poetry/sexton/sextonessay.html (accessed 18 January 2009.)

[12] Steven Gould Axelrod, *Robert Lowell: Life and Art* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978), 112.

[13] Irving Howe, "The Plath Celebration: A Partial Dissent," *Sylvia Plath: The Woman and Her Work* ed. Edward Butscher (London: Peter Owen, 1979), 233.

[14] The poet Louise Glück mentions Diane Wakoski in her discussion of the irrelevance of autobiographical "sincerity" in the artistic creation of poetry in her excellent essay, "Against Sincerity." See Louise Glück, *Proofs and Theories* (Hopwell, NJ: Ecco Press, 1994), 33-46.

[15] A cursory reading of Sharon Olds's various and mutual contradictory poems about sexual awakening should bear this insight out. Sharon Olds, *Strikes Sparks* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 2004).

[16] Strictly speaking "myth" refers to folkloric stories about the origin of creatures and natural features, the deeds of gods and goddesses, and other such topics. Used loosely, however, "myth" refers to symbolically powerful narratives that function as meaningful explanations within a community, for a variety of phenomena that vitally affect its members. The idea that confessional poetry as a enabling or myth-making performance is central to the argument of Francis L. Martinez in his essay, "Confession as Performance," which was the critical introduction to the collection of poems he submitted for his MA thesis in Creative Writing in the University of the Philippines Diliman in 2006. See Martinez, 1- 52.

[17] This, of course, is the word that Mircea Eliade used most often in order to describe what a myth does: it sustains life and gives it flavor, by opening it up to the dimension of sacredness. While Eliade acknowleged the fact that scientific demystification has pretty much destroyed the mythic life of many present-day communities, he insisted that even in our day and age, people still vitally need myths. And indeed, in his study, Eliade discovers that modern societies are still very much engaged in the business of making and/or believing in myths, only this time the myths are clothed in the language of literary, journalistic, and mass media texts that celebrate the feats and accomplishments of exemplary modern figures (who are now, in fact, celebrities). See Robert A. Segal, *Myth: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 54.

[18] See Collins, 199.

[19] James William Johnson, "Lyric," *The New Princeton Handbook of Poetic Terms*, T. F. V. Brogan, ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), 172.

[20] This, of course, is the standard feminist perspective on the sex/gender divide. While alternative theories of sex/gender difference have become increasingly important in the West — in specific, Judith Butler's critique of the pre-givenness of the male and female body — for this discussion, I would like to keep this vital distinction. For a cogent summary of the classical "sex/gender system," see Sherry Ortner and Harriet Whitehead, eds., *Sexual Meanings: The Cultural Construction of Gender and Sexuality* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

[21] For this short description of the formal characteristics of the lyric sequence, I have relied on the article by Roland Greene in the *The New Princeton Handbook of Poetic Terms*. See Roland Greene, "Lyric Sequence," *The New Princeton Handbook of Poetic Term,* T. F. V. Brogan, ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), 181.

[22] Louise Glück, "The Education of the Poet," *Proofs and Theories* (Hopewell, NJ: Ecco Press, 1994), 33-46.

[23] Louise Glück, *The Wild Iris*, Hopewell, NJ: The Ecco Press, 1992.

[24] Glück, 39.

[25] Glück, 2.

[26] Glück, 37.

[27] Glück, 45.

[28] J. Neil C. Garcia, "Kaluluwa: A Meditation on Poetry and the Soul," *Myths and Metaphors* (Manila: University of Santo Tomas Press, 2002), 112-141.

[29] J. Neil C. Garcia, *Kaluluwa: New and Selected Poems* (Manila: University of Santo Tomas Press, 2001), 65-66.

[30] J. Neil C. Garcia, *Misterios and Other Poems* (Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 2005), 63-65.

[31] J. Neil C. Garcia, *Misterios,* 137.