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The Queer Confessional: Foregrounding the Discordant Poetics of Henri Cole Through the Troubling of Genre

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ABSTRACT

This paper is a research study on a nascent American Poet, Henri Cole, whose scholarly archive remains minimal, positioning itself as a fundamental starting point to which to begin a discussion around a new, but critical voice within the field of American Poetics. The discordant poetics of Henri Cole are informed by two distinct traditions within the canon of 20th and 21st century American poetics, namely that of a queer and confessional mode to which he stands at the intersection of both movements. However, Cole's scholarly archive is woefully small due to his recent publication presence in the literary field. Thus, research was focused on analyzing Cole's chief poetic inspirations (Hart Crane and Elizabeth Bishop) as well as recursive forays into queerness and confessional poetics. In identifying that intersection, I argue that Cole is at the forefront of troubling poetic genre through the proposal of a 'queer confessional' mode of poetics. Cole troubles the notion of truth through utilizing a queer perspective on the confessional genre that has historically fell to criticisms of histrionics and overt inwardness. Instead, this paper aims to subvert a long history of literary criticism through instead focusing on how a queer confessional form 'retrieves' the confessional as a radical, poetic gesture that relishes in the instability of truth-making through a simultaneous re-affirmation of poetic genre. Cole thus disrupts and revises the notion of literary tradition through his queer perspective; in which his 'queer confessional' proposes a poetics of liberation.

KEY WORDS: Henri Cole, Queerness, Queer theory, Poetics, Apollonian-Dionysian, Confessional



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Steven Axelrod is a Distinguished Professor of English specializing in American literature. He earned his PhD from UCLA. His research is primarily focused in 20th century American Poetry with a specialized emphasis on the confessional poets of the 1950s, to which he has written books on confessional poets such as Robert Lowell and Sylvia Plath. His research also extends to poetry published in the 19th and 21st centuries. He has published over 50 articles, mostly recently on Emily Dickinson, Gertrude Stein, Robert Frost, William Carlos Williams, Elizabeth Bishop, Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath, and Amy Gerstler. He is currently writing an article on Robert Lowell on the notion of 'ethnic drift' in confessional poetry and is also editing a critical collection of his memoirs.

INTRODUCTION

*“all I am is impulse and longing / Pulled forward by the rope of your arm” – Henri Cole, *Blur**

To contextualize Henri Cole’s nascent place within the often changing canon of contemporary American poetry, I turn to Sasha Weiss’ interview of the poet published in the *Paris Review* to begin to illuminate Cole’s purpose as a poet. Cole remarks “Pleasure comes from the art-making impulse, from assembling language into art.” This paper will examine Cole’s conception of pleasure, both sexual and aesthetic, as is configured in the poetics of Henri Cole. In thinking about pleasure, it is critical to note that Cole himself is in conversation with a queer tradition of American Poetics in which he is inspired by Hart Crane and Elizabeth Bishop. His poetic mission is rooted in finding that queer pleasure in language assembly by way of the queer configuration of his lived experiences. However, this question of queerness finds a further complication in the question of what type of poetry, or genre, that Cole engages in conversation with. This paper will draw from a field of American Poetics called ‘confessional’ poetics that is more personally-driven. However, applying the genre of confessional poetics proves difficult in Cole’s reticence to the term ‘confessional.’ He defines it as, quoted from the same *Paris Review* interview, “more diary-like and confined to the here and now and without much aesthetic dignity.” His reticence troubles a simplistic foregrounding and thus, this is where I turn to the larger goal of this paper. I aim to chart a new terminology and existence of poetics, more specifically the notion of queer confession, that places Cole’s verse at the forefront of the troubling of poetic genre.

Through an analysis of Henri Cole’s discordant poetics, this paper charts the existence of a new kind of confessional poetics that resists the notion of what Miranda Sherwin identifies as “associated with private, self-revelatory impulses that are insufficiently and transparently transformed into art” (15). These ‘private, self-revelatory impulses’ play a key part in foregrounding how confessional poetics is perceived in American literary scholarship. However, reducing confessional poetics to a self-centered modality does not account for the political

and queer possibilities of confessional poetry. Thus, I argue for an existence of a queer confessional mode of poetics through a close analysis of Cole’s verse that manifests as an acceptance of contradictions and an existence of in-betweenness. Critical in reading confessional poetics is to take stock of an autobiographical lens that considers the poet’s life experiences in sync with their written verse. However, a queer confessional model de-stabilizes an over-reliance on autobiographical ‘truth.’ Queer confession espouses a ‘truth’ that exists in constant conflict with itself and doubts its own existence via contradiction. The acceptance of an unstable truth from unstable life is in turn an acceptance of both ‘self-love’ and ‘self-hate,’ a queer configuration that is articulated by a confessional mode.

AN APOLLONIAN-DIONYSIAN FRAMEWORK

To begin to identify how the queer confessional manifests in Cole’s poetics is to first articulate the Apollonian-Dionysian literary dynamic. The Apollonian-Dionysian literary framework is a model that allows for Cole to engage in a poetics of liberation that informs the queer confessional. From a literary viewpoint, the Apollonian-Dionysian framework operates as a juxtaposition of seemingly opposing forces similar to a binary. The Apollonian is presented as an orderly schema while the Dionysian pulses with discordant language. Cole’s poetry deliberately blurs the line between both. He utilizes Apollo’s order and Dionysus’ disorder in tandem to create a ‘framed disorder.’ This ‘framed disorder’ is precisely the queer function that Cole engages by troubling two concepts that appear to be, at the surface, opposites and instead engages and mixes both through deliberate contradiction. “Apollo,” The conclusory poem of *The Visible Man*, published in 1998, is exemplary of the framework of the ‘framed disorder’ that I am proposing. Divided in sequences of 14, the second ‘part’ of Apollo is what exemplifies Cole’s poetic framework of a dual ‘order’ and ‘chaos’ in his verse:

*Stay married, god said. One marriage.
Don’t abortion. Ugly mortal sin.
Beautiful Gorgeous Mary loves you
so much. Heaven tremendous thrill
of ecstasy forever. What you are,
they once was, God said, the beloved ones
before you... (1-7)*

These quoted lines are ‘Apollonian’ through the terseness of its construction. Performing a line-by-line reading, the sentences in this poem are almost fragmented and are consistently so throughout. The Apollonian order is inscribed through the pattern of terseness that is maintained in the first two lines. As one moves further forward, elements of the Dionysian ‘disorder’ begin to manifest through the lengthening of each sentence. The brevity of God’s entreaty away from sin ‘expands’ in length at the invocation of Mary. However, if the order of length is disrupted, the language seems to remain Apollonian in length and construction. Yet the growth of each line is gradual and remains compact. The almost unyielding pattern belies a discordant Dionysian impulse. “Heaven tremendous thrill of ecstasy forever” is one such illusory line that appears to be a carefully constructed in an orderly, Apollonian fashion. Its Dionysian, disorderly pulses are embedded in its ‘tremendous thrill of ecstasy,’ invoking the image of Dionysian chaos that is formed through an Apollonian assemblage.

The Apollonian-Dionysian framework is crucial to articulating the queer confessional framework and in identifying Cole’s configuration of queerness. Langdon Hammer makes a salient observation about the dual existence of the Apollonian and Dionysian dynamic by writing of his “desire to combine in his work the qualities of formal balance and open-ended, anarchic exploration that have longed defined opposing or even warring principles in American poetry.” Hammer’s lucid points elucidate the introductory analysis of “Apollo” through the remarking of a ‘formal balance,’ a formulation defined by faithfully hewing to traditional poetic form, that Cole utilizes to maintain the tightly knit Apollonian order of his poetry. However, this does not mean that the Dionysian, ‘open-ended anarchic exploration’ is at war with Cole’s ‘formal balance.’ Instead, Cole accepts the contradiction of a ‘framed disorder,’ utilizing the Apollonian and Dionysian in tandem. In the 10th sequence of Apollo, Cole is cogent in the realization of ‘assembling the words,’ in which he writes “Yet, subject is / only pretext for assembling the words / whose real story is process is flow” (3-5). Picking up on the notion of ‘language assembly,’ the ‘subject’ is Cole’s Apollonian moment of laying the framework of

‘assembling the words.’ However, Hammer’s invocation of Dionysian “free-for-all sensuality” is what creates the ‘process’ of the ‘real story.’ For Cole’s poetry, order and disorder are intimately connected in ways that reading them as opposed to each other in a binary is unproductive. Thus, what is at stake is Cole’s relishing of complication and instability in his poetic writing in which the Apollonian-Dionysian literary framework is taken as a step-by-step process. Apollonian order is the first step of the “pretext” that finds its rough ‘conclusion’ in flow. However, Dionysian disorder is by no means the conclusion to the process of ‘flow.’ I return to Hammer’s salient remarks on the Apollonian-Dionysian literary dynamic, to which he writes “We can see Cole’s Apollonian Dionysian impulses, ‘mixed up’ like those two counterpointed voices.” The mixing of what seems to be two ends of a binary is instead the flowing of contradictions into one another. Thus, it is through the identification of these Apollonian-Dionysian contradictions is where we begin to unpack the particular queerness of Cole’s verse.

UNSETTLING THE CONFSSIONAL

After unpacking the Apollonian-Dionysian dynamic in Cole’s verse, I turn to analyzing the implications of confessional poetics’ legacy as a juncture in Henri Cole’s expression of queerness. Of course, Cole remarks somewhat negatively on the notion of his poetry being classified in the confessional vein, “When I am writing, there is no pleasure in revealing the facts of my life. Pleasure comes from the art-making impulse, from assembling language into art.” It would be unproductive to impose the label of the confessional onto Cole. He acknowledges the term’s existence but does not classify himself as such. However, what I propose is not necessarily imposing the confessional genre as we know it towards Cole’s verse. As this paper proposes a new model of looking towards confessional poetics via the queer confessional, the possibility of re-imagining the confessional is rooted in a critical intersection between private, ‘self-insulated’ spaces and its political ramifications. At stake in the intersection of public/private is also the crossing between poetic confession and Cole’s queerness. Cole’s verse is in conversation with such intersections. Accordingly, his poetry is deeply invested in an examination of private,

family life (especially with a focus on the mother figure) that is also present in confessional poetics. A salient example would be “Mechanical Soft” from Cole’s *Touch*:

...Mother is dying,
you see, and proximity to this death makes me
nostalgic for the French language. I am not
a typical son, I suppose, valuing happiness,
even while spooning mechanically soft pears—
like light vanishing—into the body whose tissue
once dissolved to create breast milk for me (8-14)

The intensely personal nature of “Mechanical Soft” is indeed almost confessional-like in the traditional sense of the term. The speaker engages with the mother’s active death and expresses the intensely personal complications of the emotional turmoil of the mother’s death. The chief focus on the mother figure is another marker in which Cole displays a deep familiarity with the conventional tropes of confessional poetry. It must also be acknowledged that just as Cole utilizes its tropes, he engages in its subversions as well. In contrast to a confessional poem’s clear, photo-like language to its verse, Cole’s confessional verse is Apollonian in language and sparse in detail. The language is fantastical and surreal, the ‘mechanically soft pears’ rendering a much more unstable image in which ‘spooning’ these fantasy fruits is rooted in the pleasure of language assembly amid the mourning of the mother’s death.

I then turn towards Peter Nickowitz’s *Rhetoric and Sexuality* in further tracing the legacy of confessional poetics towards Cole’s work. Nickowitz’s research delves into a deep analysis of Cole’s chief poetic inspirations, in which Elizabeth Bishop configures as my introductory junction point through her relationship of confessional poetics as Nickowitz writes that she “distrusted the confessional movement.” Despite such a relationship, two prongs “betrays a certain tolerance for it,” namely her relationship to Robert Lowell (a major figure in 20th century confessional poetry) and her reliance upon ‘truth.’ This distrust finds an arguable continuation in Cole’s self-perception in his *Paris Review* interview. Cole makes a similar gesture, as the interviewer remarks “You’ve said you see yourself not as a confessional poet, but as an autobiographical poet.”

However, it is important to note that the term ‘confessional’ is in constant flux due to a long history of literary criticism that often derides the term. Thus, to negotiate such criticisms, this paper will turn towards analyzing the nature of “truth” and myth-making as constellatory points in which the term ‘confessional’ moves away from the impulses of an absolute truth and more into the radical function of de-stabilizing the notion of what a ‘truth’ is. Through exploring Bishop’s relationship with the truth, which Nickowitz writes as a “reliance on ‘truthfulness’ functions as one way that the poet asserts a perspective,” I argue that Bishop’s ‘truth’ is not absolute insofar that it is not required for the truth to be rooted to an absolute truth. Instead, I motion for a ‘truth’ that is unstable in poetic verse. There is an element that is ‘confessed,’ and thus, there is an element and reliance of the truth. Yet, truth itself is unstable. It is in this instability in which the confessional can exist as a radical and queer space. Thus, this de-stabilization of an absolute truth is the ‘retrieval’ of the confessional mode and the foundational marker of its intersections towards a queer mode.

QUEER CONFSSION IN PRACTICE

A look through Cole’s expression of queerness is necessary to articulate the queer confessional in practice. Indeed, the locus point of Cole’s queerness is located within the ‘framed disorder’ of his verse, of which his troubling of the Apollonian and Dionysian (order and disorder) binary is at the root of his poetic queerness. However, the queer function of the Apollonian-Dionysian literary framework only scratches the surface of how Cole troubles the notion of poetic genre and form. To further complicate this poetic queerness, the ‘confessions’ that Cole expresses in his poems are tied to two critical aspects of queer theory in conversation with poetry, mother-eroticism and the poetics of difficulty. Mother-eroticism, which Nickowitz identifies, is “desire for the mother functions as a basis for homoerotic desire” (54) and the poetics of difficulty is an expression of lived difficulty that scholar Robert K. Martin identifies as being an integral aspect to Hart Crane’s lived, queer experience. With these two aspects, Cole thus engages with the necessary queerness that troubles not only the notion of ‘truth,’ but perhaps troubles the notion of pure, literary confession which necessarily requires a clear ‘truth’ in verse. The maternal figure, with Nickowitz’s identification

of mother-eroticism in mind, is a salient conduit to which to engage and identify queer confession in practice. The maternal is located in the poem “Touch:”

*Then I lay down beside you,
dissolving loneliness,
and the white maggots wriggled*

*As the preacher spoke,
no one seemed to hear him,
tamping their eyes, touching one another. (24-29)*

The troubling of truth is performed in these six lines, through which Cole lies down and even physically desires to be with the mother figure represented through the ‘you.’ The sustained Apollonian sparseness of Cole’s verse is a deliberate troubling of truth that destabilizes the confessional-esque language of the surrealist action of Cole’s speaker lying near the dead mother’s body. Indeed, the images present in the verse are ones that take a simultaneous pleasure and refusal to elucidate a clear truth. The carefully constructed verse renders truth in Dionysian instability. The notion of truth is presented as a slippage through which the surrealism of Cole’s ‘lying down’ with the mother figure is not meant to be taken as a literal. Instead, Cole invites the reader to question precisely what is being confessed through his sparse writing. The feeling of grief is the primary emotion that Cole’s speaker emphasizes as the confessional moment of maternal loss. There are no ‘white maggots’ that physically wriggle as Cole’s speaker imagines himself and his own body to lie down next to his mother’s grave, but the image of the maggot serves as the facilitation of Cole’s mood of profound maternal loss. Cole’s bodily actions through intimate interaction with the mother and maternal grief intersect to trouble and queer the confessional form, through which this very moment is queer confession.

The questioning of truth is fundamental for a queer poet such as Cole, whose marginalized existence is reflected upon the loss of the maternal. In the framework of mother-eroticism, the loss of the mother marks a profound loss for a queer, male subject; through which even the expression of loss becomes rooted in a difficulty to which even expression proves nigh-impossible. Hart Crane, a queer, early 20th century American poet and one of Cole’s chief poetic

inspirations, engages in these similar thematics of maternal grief and is a salient example of queer theory’s poetics of difficulty in a far more precarious and homophobic time. Robert K. Martin identifies Crane’s dilemma and difficulty, as the “dilemma was double, since for him the plight of the homosexual in a heterosexual society and the plight of the artist in a materialistic were conjoined” (117). Martin then motions towards a solution with two prongs, in which sexual and political anxiety must be resolved to begin to negotiate a queer existence. I motion that the nature of Cole’s inspiration of Crane isn’t to necessarily offer a solution but is instead the acknowledgement of poetic difficulty and to articulate the struggle of being a queer poet. Martin identifies the ‘plight of the homosexual in heterosexual society,’ and that plight does indeed exist today with the current body politic being ambiguous and antagonistic towards queer folk. Thus, perhaps finding a solution to queer struggle isn’t necessarily what’s at stake. Instead, the tools to articulate queer struggle and sexuality is at the core of the relationship between Cole and Crane. Through that close examination, examining the poetics of difficulty through Cole’s literary predecessors becomes integral into investigating how his poetics operate in a queer American framework.

A CONCLUSORY NOTE: ARTICULATING A QUEER CONFSSIONAL

The three angles of the Apollonian-Dionysian literary framework, identifying and unpacking the confessional form in the context of Cole’s verse, and then putting queer confession in practice is a prototypical articulation of the queer confessional model. However, I stress the slippery and nascent nature of this model. The notion of queer confession is foregrounded upon conceptual paradigms (queerness and confession) that are themselves considered unstable and do not have a fixed definition. Thus, defining the term must be attentive to the implications of slippage. Queer confession must relish in instability, especially when the notions of truth and life experiences are called into question, becoming deliberately clouded in poetic verse. This foregrounding has only taken a brief foray into each of these three angles. However, further study requires a more holistic look in Cole’s bibliography as well as a more in-depth look into queer and confessional literature. In doing so, perhaps we can further the project of re-defining

what confessional poetics means in our present moment and its inseparability from queerness and the body politic. A queer perspective on literary tradition proves fruitful in ‘retrieving’ and ‘liberating’ the confessional tradition towards a poetics of liberation. The inseparability from the body politic is necessary in foregrounding the political work of queer confession, of which turning towards the

personal and private space carries within it a statement of defiance, embodiment, and a refusal of heteronormative subjectivity. The queer confessional is a proposal of poetic possibility, liberating tradition and deliberately engaging with difficulty to propose a new genre, and perhaps even a new modality, of poetics in our present moment.

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