Introduction

Buddy Glass, the narrator of *Seymour: An Introduction* finds it difficult to describe his larger-than-life brother or pinpoint exactly what makes Seymour so remarkable. Buddy struggles with the personality of his brother, because it seems to escape articulation. J.D. Salinger has conveyed the singularity of the Glass family in other short stories and novels (*Franny & Zooey, Raise High the Roof Beam, Carpenters*), but it is in *An Introduction* that he makes an attempt to deliver a pseudo-biography. The result is a self-conscious diatribe about the impossibility of truly getting at the heart of a person, particularly when that person is a poet. Buddy remarks that "…the more personal Seymour's poems appear to be, or *are*, the less revealing the content is of any known details of his actual daily life in this Western world" (Salinger 84). The quote underlines the basic conceit of *An Introduction*, which is that the personal can only be "introduced"; it can only be given broad strokes but it can never be summarily captured. The more you try to grasp it, the quicker it will slip away. The same can be said for Seymour's poetry; the sense of intimacy it purports actually gives nothing away.

In an address given at the Goethe House, Freud made a similar point in connection to the German poet, stating that, "Goethe was... in spite of the abundance of autobiographical records, a careful concealer" (qtd. in Jarrell 144) and that, though Goethe called his own works "fragments of a great confession", that confession served, in Freud's opinion, "to hide himself from himself" (qtd in Jarrell 22).

Often times, talking about yourself is an effective way to conceal or even modify your identity. It is why readers and critics look upon autobiographic writing with some measure of suspicion. In Lacanian

terminology, the subject only emerges as part of a discourse with an Other, it can only be born out of intersubjectivity (Olney 324) and, therefore, "the self can no more be author of its own discourse than any producer of a text can be called an author – that is the originator - of his writing" (325). To put it differently, the self cannot claim independence from other Selves, from other texts and from other discourses. The self is enmeshed in an intertextual matrix (325) and is not formed by a singular effort. As consequence, if one wanted to depict the self, one would need to depict the entire matrix that enables it. But as postmodern subjects, we have undergone a "metamorphosis" through which our subjectivity has been dispersed and codified (322). As such, it is almost impossible to "talk" about ourselves in a way that will coherently convey the Whitmanian multitude of our being. The more we attempt to do so - consciously or not - the more, paradoxically, we distance ourselves from our subjectivity.

This frustration is encapsulated in what has been the gradual collapse of autonomies and binaries in the postmodern world. Bruno Latour argues that we have gone beyond certain distinctions and separations. He points out that past modernity was characterized by a divorce between natural power (Nature) and social power (Culture): natural power was in charge of providing factual, scientific information about objects, whereas social power was at the helm of "representing subjects" (29). However, as with most systematic binaries, the Nature/Culture opposition could not sustain itself over time, and this led to an altered relationship between object and subject. The uncontainable subject spilled over and began "recruit[ing] more and more objects to make it last" (Latour 31). Consequently, the postmodern subject acts as an intrusion upon the object and, in our case, the text. Roland Barthes' concept of a "readerly" and "writerly" text hinges upon this very intrusion, underscoring the fact that the subject/reader ultimately enters a relationship with the text and re-writes it, he or she becoming a "producer of the text" (Barthes, *S/Z* 4). So if the subject already modifies the text, how much more does the subject modify their own *personal* text?

Buddy Glass' efforts to assess his brother's personality are plagued by his own subjectivity, by the multiple emotional tangents that all connect to Seymour, but also seem to lead us further and further away from him. Buddy is writing about *himself* writing about his brother, and as a result,

we deal with different levels of intersubjectivity where the subject is neither Buddy nor Seymour, but someone in between. Salinger presents this narrative as one doomed to fail from the start, but it is the very failure to depict personhood which sustains the effort of self-discovery. We still follow Buddy in his complicated search for the sibling self because it opens avenues into what it means to be a subject. Even if Seymour's poetry ultimately eschews personal interpretation, Buddy's effort to understand him mirrors what Kennedy & Gioia call "a hunger for honest self-examination" (299). The "hunger for self-examination", whether ultimately conducive to a genuine rendition of the subject or not, gives the text meaning and direction. The search for selfhood, whether it can be articulated or not, is a compelling journey and, one might argue, it is the only way that one can arrive at the dispersed postmodern subject.

This journey may take many forms but it is in poetry that the difficulties and the satisfactions of self-examination become more urgent, since it is a medium which thrives on the clash between personality and truth. This clash may be observed in the inaugural efforts of the ancient poets. For Homer, it is the "audê" (Gr.), given to the poet by the Muses and, therefore, divinity, which is responsible for the act of creation (Ford 174). "Audê" may be translated as the plain human voice, but it is not the simple vocal apparatus; rather, as Fournier argues, it is the potential to "emit a sound that is harmonious, powerful, and above all endowed with meaning" (qtd. in Ford 174). The gods appear to "breathe" audê into the poet (174) and the exchange is as a life-giving force that raises the poet from subject to messenger. Interestingly, the message (i.e. the poem) is still delivered in human voice, despite its divine origins (174). It seems that even if the poet relinquishes responsibility for the act of creation, the channel of expression remains marked by human subjectivity. The gods reserve other manners of speech that are not meant for human ears, such as "omphé" (a derivative of "song") or "ossa" (a derivative of "voice") (Ford 175), but "audê" remains the most accessible "voice", which makes for a strange hybrid that retains qualities from both realms. Poetry is then a hybrid too, a mixture of the divine and the personal, of what is represented as general truth and what is represented as voiced and embodied subjectivity.

Throughout the history of poetry, the two elements were often placed in subordination, with personal experience having to serve and ultimately

be integrated within general truths (Eliot 251), but postmodernist subjectivity questions the possibility of creative autonomy and whether the relationship between truth and self is much more diffuse and unstable than previously thought. This line of thinking was adopted by various artistic factions which emerged in America in the latter half of the 20th century, one of them being the poetic movement known as confessionalism, which aims to explore the unstable nature of personal discourse and what this means for us as subjects. Like Buddy Glass, confessionalism acknowledges the impossibility of arriving at a holistic self. It argues that poetry can be the medium in which questions of subjectivity and autonomy may be explored, precisely because poetry forces the subject to be present, whether as a messenger of the gods, gifted with *audê*, or as an elusive, unmanageable persona like Seymour Glass. As Peter Brooks argues in *Troubling Confessions* (2000), confessional speech may be the "vehicle of the most authentic truth, yet capable of the most damaging, self-destructive untruth" (9) and it is this precarious balance that is explored in confessional poetry. Personal experiences of a painful or even shameful nature are brought to the light - almost *exorcised* in verse - with the purpose of pushing the barriers of what can and cannot be said. It comes down to the simple act of "talking about yourself" and discovering how much of it conceals or reveals you. As Jo Gill posits: "to think about confession is to abandon…dependable notions of reliability, authority and authenticity" (*Modern Confessional Writing* 1) and to embrace the full spectrum of postmodern subjectivity, despite its unreliable and sometimes inauthentic manifestations.

In the following chapters we will look at the origins of confession and the way it has shaped Western culture and its expression in matters of authenticity and reliability. We will also follow the trajectory of confessional poetry and its impact on postmodern subjectivity. The second half of the book will be dedicated to understanding and exploring the way in which confessionalism as an American movement opened the gates for many other selves that had been denied space in the literary canon. In particular, we will focus on female selfhood and its multiple reflections in confessional poetry. As we shall see, the construction of female subjectivity mirrors the confessional trajectory in both purpose and method.