THE DRUM SET WORKS OF STUART SAUNDERS SMITH AS A CORRELATIVE TRILogy THROUGH COMPOSITIONAL UNITY AND AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL CONTENT AS CONFESSION

Matthew Timman

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Committee:
Roger B. Schupp, Advisor
Eftychia Papanikolaou
ABSTRACT

Roger Schupp, Advisor

Stuart Saunders Smith (b. 1948) is widely known as a significant compositional figure in contemporary music, and most notably for his music for solo percussion. His works are internationally performed and are characterized by a heavy use of complex polyrhythmic devices and atonality achieved through the intuitive selection of pitches, as opposed to structured tonal systems. Smith’s expansive output as a composer has yielded three works for solo drum set: *Blue Too* (1983), *Brush* (2001) and *Two Lights* (2002). Despite a space of eighteen years between Smith’s first composition for drum set, *Blue Too*, and the completion of the other two compositions, *Brush* and *Two Lights*, consideration should be given to the assertion that the three compositions are interrelated. Although they originated from differing stylistic periods of Smith’s career, the three pieces can be found to share common aspects of rhythmic vocabulary and form. Aside from the compositional aspects, the pieces may also be related through autobiographical content and influence. Smith’s description of his work as being that of a “confessional composer” connects his compositional style to that of the autobiographical writings of the “confessional” movement of poetry in the 1950s and 1960s, specifically the works of Robert Lowell, John Berryman, and Delmore Schwartz. The purpose of this thesis is to explore the interrelationship of Smith’s *Blue Too*, *Brush*, and *Two Lights* with the post-Modern Confessional movement through compositional and autobiographical analysis.
To my family.
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INTRODUCTION

Stuart Saunders Smith (b. 1948) is widely known as a significant compositional figure in contemporary music, and most notably for his music for solo percussion. His works are internationally performed and are characterized by an extensive use of complex polyrhythmic devices and atonality achieved through the intuitive selection of pitches, as opposed to structured tonal systems. Smith’s expansive output as a composer has yielded three works for solo drum set: *Blue Too* (1983), *Brush* (2001) and *Two Lights* (2002). Despite a space of eighteen years between Smith’s first composition for drum set, *Blue Too*, and the completion of the other two compositions, *Brush* and *Two Lights*, consideration should be given to the assertion that the three compositions are interrelated. Although they originated from differing stylistic periods of Smith’s career, the three pieces can be found to share common aspects of rhythmic vocabulary and form. Aside from the compositional aspects, the pieces may also be related through autobiographical content and influence. Smith’s description of his work as being that of a “confessional composer” connects his compositional style to that of the autobiographical writings of the Confessional movement of poetry in the 1950s and 1960s, specifically the works of Robert Lowell, John Berryman, and Delmore Schwartz.

The purpose of this thesis is to explore the interrelationship of Smith’s *Blue Too, Brush*, and *Two Lights*, through compositional and autobiographical analysis. Through formal analysis of the compositions, this study will provide evidence of unifying features of rhythmic vocabulary and stylistic compositional techniques. Additionally, through biographical and historical research this study will present analysis of the autobiographical nature of the three pieces and their relationship to the Confessional movement of literature.
Biographical Information of Stuart Saunders Smith

Stuart Saunders Smith was born in Portland, Maine on March 16, 1948. Smith began musical studies at the age of six with musician Charles Newcomb, and continued his studies with him through high school. Under the tutelage of Newcomb, Smith quickly gained notoriety for his skill; he was an All-State snare drummer in the 1960s and active in youth jazz orchestras.\(^1\) It is with his studies with Newcomb that he would first learn about composition, and improvisational music through playing drum set. In an interview conducted with Smith, he explains the format of his lessons with Newcomb and the emphasis on improvisation as part of the curriculum.

I learned a lot about composition with Charles Newcomb. Part of each lesson was reading music and improvising within various styles, like rumba, tango, swing, dixieland, etc. He would play piano, I would play the drum set.\(^2\)

Upon entering high school, Smith was active in his high school music program, and was involved with both the band and orchestra programs, playing with the band on Monday, Wednesday and Friday and the orchestra Tuesday and Thursday. Outside of school, Smith organized a Free Jazz combo where “experimenting in free-form as well as more traditional styles were regular activities.”\(^3\)

Smith studied for a year at Boston’s prestigious Berklee College of Music majoring in percussion and arranging before departing to complete his studies at the Hartt School of Music in Hartford, Connecticut. During this period from 1967 to 1972, Smith was incredibly active in the Hartford area, founding a number of ensembles devoted to working with experimental music.

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\(^2\) Stuart Saunders Smith, telephone interview with author, February 4, 2014. See Appendix for a complete transcription of my interview with the composer.
\(^3\) Welsh, *The Music of Stuart Saunders Smith*, xxvii.
 Upon completion of his studies at the Hartt School in 1972, Smith received both a Bachelor of Musical Arts and a Master of Music with an emphasis on percussion performance. Smith continued his musical studies at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, where he received his Doctorate of Musical Arts in composition, with a minor in percussion performance, in 1977.

In 1975, Smith accepted a position at the University of Maryland, where he served as Professor of Music, teaching composition and music theory. During his tenure at the University of Maryland, he worked to organize lectures and discussions with experimental musicians and artists, including Milton Babbitt, John Cage, Christian Wolff, Steve Schick, Christopher Rouse, and Brian Ferneyhough. Stuart Saunders Smith currently resides in Sharon, Vermont, with his wife, percussionist and scholar on contemporary music notation, Sylvia Smith.

Statement of the Compositional Style of Stuart Saunders Smith

Stuart Saunders Smith’s music in general can be called intensely polyrhythmic and without tonal center due to intuitive selection of pitches. He states that one of his greatest influences of composition came from his first teacher, Charles Newcomb. Through his studies with Newcomb, he would improvise often, and found that composition is a form of improvisation. He stated that “[c]omposing for me has always been a way of improvising slowly, so I would I say that improvising influenced me compositionally as much as anything did.” Collecting from his background in jazz, Smith strives to create works where improvisation is the

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4 Ibid., xxvii
5 Welsh, The Music of Stuart Saunders Smith, xxix
6 Ibid.
7 Ibid.
8 Smith, interview.
act of composition, described by John Welsh in *The Music of Stuart Saunders Smith* as where “jazz, the avant-garde, and sound-poetry coalesce.”

Aside from the concept of composition as a slow form of improvisation, Smith says that he uses polyrhythms extensively in his works because of their fundamental inclusion in our lives, and that polyrhythms are in fact natural, while metered rhythms are unnatural:

> The human body is an extraordinarily complex polyrhythmic system. You have the heart beating a certain speeds at certain times, the stomach does the same, all of the other organs have their own rhythms. So, polyrhythms are natural and metered rhythms are not natural.

By this Smith shows that it is not really that he is working with complex rhythms, but rather rhythms that are innate to the human body and human existence, stating that his music is in actuality improvisations coming from his own body rhythms.

**Background Information of the Confessional Movement and Its Correlation to Smith as a Confessional Composer**

Confessional literature refers to the output of a specific collection of writers, mostly active between 1959 and the early 1970s in the United States, which shared similarities based on the use of autobiographical content. Literary critic M. L. Rosenthal in a review of Robert Lowell’s *Life Studies* first coined the term Confessionalism in 1959 in the review *Poetry as Confession*; this collection of poems would serve as one of Lowell’s most celebrated works and as the pinnacle of the Confessional style. Lowell’s poems spoke of personal, intimate matters and presented aspects of the poet’s life for the review of the reader. Rosenthal describes this in *Poetry as Confession*: “Lowell removes the mask. His speaker is unequivocally himself, and it is

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10 Smith, interview.
11 Ibid.
hard not to think of *Life Studies* as a series of personal confidences."\(^{13}\) Though this specific historic period and body of poetry and literature is considered the Confessional mode of writing, it is not to say that publishing of Lowell’s *Life Studies* or the invention of the term by Rosenthal initiated the creation of this type of writing. Lowell’s *Life Studies* however, served as a catalyst for the post-Modern Confessional movement of literature, which included the works of poets John Berryman, Delmore Schwartz, Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath.

In general, the idea of writing as confession long predates Lowell and Rosenthal, and can be traced in history to Whitman, Frost and even as far back as the *Confessions* of Saint Augustine of the late 4th century. The Confessions of Saint Augustine are seen as the first autobiographical work in Western literature, in which Saint Augustine discusses his memories and regrets of a self-perceived life of sin. It would later be argued by poet Jerome Mazzaro that it was used as the model for Confessional poet John Berryman’s final published book of poetry, *Love and Fame*.\(^{14}\) Walt Whitman was possibly the first blatantly confessional poet. Phillips states in *The Confessional Poets*, that if “Lowell is the father of the current group, then Whitman is the great-grandfather.”\(^{15}\) Whitman is seen as an incredibly important influence on the Confessional movement and is acknowledged for his contribution by a number of the members of the group. For example, in Berryman’s *Dream Songs* and Roethke’s *Mixed Sequence* Whitman is mentioned directly. Berryman mentions Whitman in the *Dream Songs* as “the great Walt” and Roethke’s *Mixed Sequence* calls him forward, “Be with me, Whitman, maker of catalogues: / For the world invades me again.”\(^{16}\)

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\(^{15}\) Ibid., 4.

\(^{16}\) Ibid.
Aside from these influences and historical traces, the Confessional movement can be seen as a reaction to or a result of the Modernists and then by relation New Criticism. The Modernists were diverse and without common program, however the critical interpretation of Modernism, New Criticism, presented an “influential vision of what poetry should be”\(^\text{17}\) and at the center of the ideology was T.S. Eliot as the principal inspiration. Eliot proclaimed that the poet did not have “a ‘personality’ to express, but a particular medium” and that poetry should not be an “expression of personality” but rather “an escape from personality.”\(^\text{18}\) By the 1950s, the ideology of New Criticism had been made doctrine and was studied in earnest by each of the Confessional poets.

As each of the poets of the Confessional movement progressed through their careers, they would begin by attempting to write in the style set forth by Eliot which was “ambiguous, allusive, symbolic, and impersonal.”\(^\text{19}\) What truly unites this collection of writers as a movement is how they eventually broke from the concepts of New Criticism. As Modernist poets strove to “obliterate their own concrete personalities in their poems,”\(^\text{20}\) the Confessional poets took great care to write with the Self as the primary subject with candor and openness.

One of the most important breaks between the Modernists and the Confessional poets was the break from the concept of the objective correlative, which was put forth by Eliot in his 1921 essay, *Hamlet and His Problems*:

> The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an “objective correlative”; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion; such that when the external facts,


\(^{18}\) Ibid., xiii.

\(^{19}\) Ibid., xiv.

which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked.\textsuperscript{21}

Eliot explains that the only way to properly express emotion is to find an impersonal symbolic representation of the intended emotion, instead of providing that which would be the direct and personal. As a result, the Confessional poets broke with one of the most important views of Eliot and the Modernists by allowing the subject of the poem to be the Self, and allowing the impersonal to become incredibly personal. In Life Studies, Lowell rids himself of the symbols of the Modernist generation and instead “gives them a local habitation and a name.”\textsuperscript{22} In The Wounded Surgeon, Kirsch is quick to point out, however, that though the burgeoning movement was noted for the autobiographical and starkly personal content, they were not considered more honest since “telling the truth, especially if it is disagreeable, was a central commandment of Modernism.”\textsuperscript{23}

In his study on The Confessional Poets, Robert Philips attempts to trace the characteristics of the specifically post-Modern Confessional poets, and outlines sixteen different concepts, which can be seen in their works. Although not all works of the Confessional poets contain all of these aspects, this list merely works as a starting point for understanding the essence of this literary movement. Phillips lists these as the important features of the Confessional style:

\begin{quote}
It is highly subjective 
It is an expression of personality, not an escape from it. 
It is therapeutic and/or purgative 
Its emotional content is personal rather than impersonal 
It is most often narrative 
It portrays unbalanced, afflicted or alienated protagonists. 
It employs irony and understatement for detachment. 
It uses the self as a poetic symbol around which is woven a personal mythology.
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{22} Adam Kirsch, The Wounded Surgeon: Confession and Transformation in Six American Poets, 23. 
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid.
There are no barriers of subject matter.  
There are no barriers between the reader and the poet.  
The poetry is written in the open language of ordinary speech.  
It is written in open forms.  
It displays moral courage.  
It is antidisestablishment in content, with alienation a common theme.  
Personal failure is also a favorite theme, as is mental illness.  
The poet strives for personalization rather than universalization.  

The concepts set forth by Phillips can generally be placed into two groups: aspects related to that of content and those related to form.  

At the most basic level, the concepts of content indicate that the composition of the Confessional literature is made of personal and autobiographical content. With the dismissal of Eliot’s objective correlative, the reader is no longer detached from the author but rather interacting directly with the creator. This style acts not as a method of expression through indirect means but through the expression of the personality of the author. This level of frankness between author and reader leads to a level of personal risk not as prevalent to that of the Modernists; Kirsch notes in The Wounded Surgeon that, following the publication of Life Studies “it seemed anyone who exposed less than Lowell wanted to risk less; and it is the risk, not the exposure, that makes a poem live.”  

The concepts of personal and autobiographical content can be exemplified in Lowell’s poem Waking in the Blue from Life Studies. In Waking in the Blue, Lowell discusses one of his stays in a mental hospital, speaking candidly about his struggle with mental illness and discussing one of his most “frightening and personally shameful” moments.  

The other main sets of concepts are those relating to the form in which the poems were written and presented. Confessional poems are narrative poems focusing on the Self and more

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26 Ibid., 29.
informal speech is used. Additionally, open forms are used in order to structure the poems. An extreme example of informal speech can be found in the writings of John Berryman, and the use of his character Mr. Bones throughout his collection of poems *The Dream Songs*. In *The Dream Songs*, the characters are Henry, who is a caricature of Berryman, and Henry’s unseen friend, who is referred to as Mr. Bones. The primary characterization of Mr. Bones is that of a man in black-face, much as an actor in a vaudeville minstrel show, who speaks in an exaggerated stereotypical Southern black dialect.

Berryman’s works also serve as an excellent example of the concept of open form in the structure of Confessional poems. In *The Dream Songs*, Berryman reinvented the sonnet into what he called “an extended sonnet,” which consisted of a verse form of three stanzas of six lines each. Within the Songs compositionally, there results a common pattern of “discussing at least two separate topics that by the end more often than not merge with each other.” Berryman also incorporates sprung rhythm, where each foot or measure has a single beat, described as “the nearest rhythm of prose that is the native and natural rhythm of speech, the least forced, the most rhetorical and emphatic of all rhythms.”

Though the style of confessional literature continues to this day, the post-Modern Confessional movement began to fade in the late 1960s and the early 1970s, due unfortunately to the deaths of many of the leading poets of the movement. Delmore Schwartz died in 1966, and became the dedicatee of Berryman’s 1968 collection *His Toy, His Dream, His Rest*. The movement also saw the suicides of some of its most notable members: Sylvia Plath in 1963; John Berryman in 1973 and Anne Sexton in 1974. Although this specific movement of confessional

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28 Ibid.
29 Ibid.
literature faded, it left lasting influence and served as the catalyst for a number of new movements in literature, including The New York School, Language poets and New Formalist poets.

Stuart Saunders Smith has been described as a “confessional composer,” and the intention of this study is to find the similarities between the works of the post-Modern Confessional poets and the works of Smith in both methods of form and in confession as content. Though well versed in the literary movement of Confessionalism, Smith makes it clear that it is not from a single source that the creation of a piece of work comes:

Of course, I was aware of Transcendentalist literature. Growing up in New England we were taught that in high school very rigorously; we knew those authors. Later on, we knew confessional authors. So, coming out of New England those things were part of our intellectual architecture. But was I influenced on a one to one basis? You know, “oh my goodness, I’m going to be influenced by this,” I don’t think any composer or literary person worth his or her salt works that way.

It is important to understand then, that this study of Smith’s work is not to observe a clear cause and effect relationship between the works of the Confessional writers and the compositions of Smith. This thesis will rather highlight where the features of Confessionalism as part of Smith’s greater “intellectual architecture” are revealed in his compositions, and how through these revelations the justification for a suite of works can be made by his adherence to the concepts of Confessional literature put forth by Phillips in *The Confessional Poets*.

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31 Smith, interview.
CHAPTER II. BLUE TOO (1987)

Blue Too was written in 1987, and serves chronologically as the first of Smith’s three works for solo drum set. In contrast to the later composition, Two Lights, this work is scored for a standard four-piece drum set; instrumentation consists of ride and crash cymbals, hi-hat, high tom-tom, floor tom-tom, snare drum, and bass drum. The methods in which Smith uses the drum set are seemingly standard methods, not including any extended techniques which would require further technical ability from the player aside from that of standard drum set technique and understanding of polyrhythmic studies.

When considering analysis of the drum set works of Stuart Saunders Smith it is helpful to remember how Smith describes his concept of composition as an act of “slow improvisation.” Much of the material contained within Blue Too, Brush, and Two Lights is rarely repeated, so much observation of the contour and progression of the works will be noted by changes in tempo, rhythmic density, dynamics, as well as techniques employed. All of these works, like most of Smith’s works, are devoid of measure markings or time signatures, therefore all analysis will be based on page and system numbers in analyzing Blue Too and Brush.

Blue Too begins with a section marked as circa 48 to the quarter note, which will be considered the exposition section, consisting of two systems until a tempo change at system 3 of page 1. This section is incredibly sparse and free, consisting of limited rhythmic material and multiple inclusions of a single beat with six grace notes with interplay between the open hi-hat and ride cymbal. Compared to the rest of the composition, this period is incredibly low in dynamic level and sparse in rhythmic activity; it is also significant because it contains pieces of material, which would be used again later in the piece. This section is mimicked and the grace
note figure is repeated verbatim as part of the short coda at the end of the composition as seen compared in Examples 2.1.

**EXAMPLE 2.1** Stuart Smith, *Blue Too for drum set* comparison of p. 1, system 1 and p. 7, system 5.

The transition from tempo circa 48 to tempo circa 68-72 on the fourth system of the first page begins a section that continues until system 4 of page 4. When viewing the beginning of the section at page 1, system 4 and the end of the section at page 4, system 4, the stark similarities
can be found. The onset and ending of this section and for a period of time afterwards, are in retrograde of the other, as traced and illustrated in Example 2.3.

**EXAMPLE 2.3** Stuart Smith, *Blue Too for drum set*, comparisons of retrograde materials, pp. 1, 2, 4.

This section has a contour of continually crescendoing to system 4 of page 3, where it reaches fortississimo and then gradually diminuendos back down to pianissimo by the end of the section.
Following the conclusion of the A section we reach a section which consists of two long crescendi, one leading to a roll at the end of page 5, and the second is a page-long crescendo leading to a section marked “as fast as possible.” This section, classified as B, contains two smaller sections in an antecedent and consequent relationship similar to that of a parallel period. Though both periods contain similar contour, reaching a dynamic climax before resolving to the softer dynamics, the second period reaches a higher dynamic of fortissississimo before finally resolving to softer dynamics. This is completely resolved when the composition resolves to the tempo of quarter-note circa 60 on system 4 of page 7.

The final resolution of the composition results out of material found in the very beginning of the piece, as stated previously, which presents the end to the final arc within the composition. The overall form is then presented in Figure 2.1 showing how through the use of dynamics and rhythmic complexity Smith presents three separate complex arcs running through the entire piece. Section A has a single climax, with retrograde material giving the section a feeling of symmetry. Section B contains two climax points, each of them building through increasingly longer crescendi until reaching the highest dynamic point at the conclusion of page 6. Above all of these sections is that introduction and coda use related and some identical vocabulary giving the overall arc of the composition a further feeling of symmetry.
Fig. 2.1 Diagram of Form and Dynamic Contour for Smith’s Blue Too.
Analysis of Confessional Content and Influence

In *The Music of Stuart Saunders Smith* by John P. Welsh, a great deal of insight into the motivation and influence of the composition of *Blue Too* can be ascertained from an interview conducted between Welsh and Smith. In this conversation Smith discusses how *Blue Too* relates to his 1979 composition *Blue* for trumpet, drum set and double bass, and his hopes of setting off a revolution of works for solo drum set:

[Something] I had in mind in composing *Blue* (and *Blue Too* for drum set solo) is to contribute to the written literature of the drum set. I’m very keen to help establish a serious drum set literature that can rival any other instrumental literature. I hope to live to see that day when solo drum set players can go on tour like concert pianists and give concerts of solo drum music. After all, the drum set is an indigenous American instrument, so Americans should develop a written literature for it. In fact, the drum set is a lot like America. It consists of instruments from other cultures blended into one collective instrument.¹

An important concept to observe from his discussion of the drum set as a collection of instruments is that it is incredibly similar to his description of the influence of a composer; a composer’s work is from a collected knowledge and the result of vast experience, not from a single source.

Returning to the concepts set forth by Phillips in *The Confessional Poets*, connections can be made to the content of the composition and to precepts of Confessionalism proposed by Phillips. *Blue Too* is dedicated to Charles Newcomb, Smith’s first drum teacher, and discussed as one of the first places where he learned about composition and improvisation firsthand. It is through studies with Newcomb that Smith learned how to improvise jazz drum set, and set him off in the direction of composition as a slow form of improvisation. Specifically, Smith mentions that his concept for the composition comes from improvisation in a hard bop jazz style.² The concept that can be best personified in this composition is Phillips’ concept that “poetry is

² Smith, interview.
written in the open language of ordinary speech.” Blue Too can fulfill this concept in two ways: through the concept of jazz as an American art form, and through Smith’s proposition that polyrhythms are natural.

Blue Too is based on Blue for trumpet, drum set and double bass, which Smith explains as directly related to variations of jazz music.

How does one melody relate to another? It’s all variation techniques. I studied a transcription of Louie Armstrong playing on the tune “I Don’t Know Why I’m So Black and Blue.” Then I composed the trumpet part from that; Blue is a variation of his variation. Then I composed variations of the trumpet melodies to create the bass part. The drum set part is variations of the rhythms and melodies of both the bass and trumpet music.3

Jazz as an American art form and drum set as an American instrument are familiar to the common person and in the realm of musical vocabulary can be considered those of the mainstream musical world or Phillips’ “ordinary speech.” This cultural connection can be compared to the characterization of Mr. Bones, a man in black-face as an actor in a vaudeville minstrel show, which Berryman used throughout his works.

Phillips’ concept can be looked at from another direction with Smith’s idea of polyrhythms as a bodily occurrence and therefore as more natural than those of metered rhythms. Taking this into account it can be seen that the most “ordinary speech” can be from the natural rhythms of the body. This can be compared to the works of Berryman and his use of sprung rhythm in his poems. Both Smith and Berryman worked to create works which were of the most natural rhythm, and therefore went to the human body and speech as the basis for the creation of their works of art.

CHAPTER III. *BRUSH* (2001)

*Brush* for solo drum set was composed in 2001 and serves as the second in the trilogy of pieces composed by Smith for solo drum set. This composition once again uses the instrumentation of standard four-piece drum set; instrumentation consists of a single ride cymbal, hi-hat, high tom-tom, floor tom-tom, snare drum, and bass drum. For the playing of *Brush*, Smith stipulates that it should be played with brushes with metal handles throughout and includes his own notation of techniques to be employed by performer; this includes scraping the brush across the surface of the drum once, rapidly scraping from side to side, and scraping the metal handle along the surface of the cymbal. The notation key provided in the performance notes of the composition can be found in Figure 3.1.

**Notation:** Play with brushes with metal handles throughout.

- — Scrape brush across surface of drum once.
-=-=-=-=-=-= Rapidly scrape brush from side to side on drum surface.
- / Scrape metal handle of brush along the surface of the cymbal.
- o Open hi-hat, play top cymbal with brush or metal handle, as indicated.
- φ Hi-hat mostly closed, played with brushes, sounds “trashy.”

\[\text{\textcopyright Fig 3.1 }\]
When viewing the compositional aspects of this piece against *Blue Too*, there is an obvious change in Smith’s compositional approach. Though there is still heavy use of polyrhythmic figures throughout the piece, there is now the additional use of nested polyrhythms—that is, polyrhythmic figures placed within polyrhythmic figures; the first of these figures is in the first line of the composition and illustrated in Example 3.1. A further deviation from *Blue Too* is Smith’s use of polyrhythms against other rhythms than the quarter note; for example, we now find sixteenth-note quintuplets being composed on top of sixteenth-note sextuplet rhythms. Another major difference in compositional aspects between those of *Blue Too* and *Brush* is the slow resurgence of Smith’s use of barlines in composition. Though the first page of *Brush* does not include barlines, the subsequent pages include barlines with increasing frequency. However, these bars are without notated time signature and vary greatly in length throughout the composition.

**EXAMPLE 3.1** Stuart Smith, *Brush for drum set*, example of nested polyrhythms, p. 1, system 1.

A concept that Smith introduces in this composition and then uses again in the final composition of the trilogy, *Two Lights*, is the use of figures introduced in the performance notes
as nine-septuplets (notated as 9/7) seen in Example 3.2. This is to be interpreted as nine notes at the speed of the septuplet note; this is also used in the composition for other durations such as 11/32, which would be 11 notes at the speed of the 32nd note. In metronomic terms, with the written tempo 60 beats per minute to the quarter note, the speed of the sixteenth note in the septuplet is 420 beats per minute, so the 9/7 figure would be nine notes at the metronome marking of 420 beats per minute.

**EXAMPLE 3.2** Stuart Smith, *Brush for drum set*, example of use of “nine septuplet” notation, page 1, system 6.

Formal analysis of the piece is an almost impossible task; the piece lacks repeated material and flows in stream of consciousness form of composition. Among the few aspects that can be used as landmarks in order to create an image of form is the use of instrumentation during the piece, and the changes in tempo. Unlike *Blue Too*, *Brush* does not have a clear-cut climax in tempo or dynamic; the piece has frequent tempo changes, and dynamics can change as often as three times during the course of a quarter-note length figure. The episodic nature of the piece is outlined in Table 3.1.
TABLE 3.1 Sectional outline of Stuart Saunders Smith’s *Brush* for solo drum set.

**Brush - Stuart Saunders Smith**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Instrumentation</th>
<th>Tempo</th>
<th>Duration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Snare drum and Hi-Hat</td>
<td>$\frac{1}{4} = 60 - 66$</td>
<td>$32 \frac{1}{4}$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;</td>
<td>$\frac{1}{4} = \text{as fast as possible}$</td>
<td>$5 \frac{1}{4}$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;</td>
<td><em>A tempo</em></td>
<td>$17 \frac{1}{4}$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;</td>
<td>$\frac{1}{4} = \text{as fast as possible}$</td>
<td>$8 \frac{1}{4}$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High tom-tom and Bass drum</td>
<td><em>A tempo</em></td>
<td>$32 \frac{1}{4}$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;</td>
<td>$\frac{1}{4} = \text{as fast as possible}$</td>
<td>$5 \frac{1}{4}$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use of entire drumset begins</td>
<td><em>A tempo</em></td>
<td>$51 \frac{1}{4}$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;</td>
<td><em>Faster</em></td>
<td>$11 \frac{1}{4}$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;</td>
<td><em>A tempo</em></td>
<td>$58 \frac{1}{4}$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;</td>
<td>$\frac{1}{4} = \text{as fast as possible}$</td>
<td>$13 \frac{1}{4}$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;</td>
<td><em>A tempo</em></td>
<td>$44 \frac{1}{4} - 1 \frac{1}{4}$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;</td>
<td>$\frac{1}{4} = \text{as fast as possible}$</td>
<td>$4 \frac{1}{4}$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;</td>
<td><em>A tempo</em></td>
<td>$92 \frac{1}{4}$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;</td>
<td>$\frac{1}{4} = 48$</td>
<td>$1 \frac{1}{4}$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;</td>
<td><em>A tempo</em></td>
<td>$50 \frac{1}{4} - 1 \frac{1}{4}$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;</td>
<td>$\frac{1}{4} = 48$</td>
<td>$3 \frac{1}{4}$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;</td>
<td><em>A tempo</em></td>
<td>$52 \frac{1}{4}$</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This section contains 9/7 and 11/32 figures, cannot compute exact metronomic duration.
Analysis of Confessional Content and Influence

A theme that is prevalent in the majority of Confessional literature is the torment of mental illness. Most if not all of the writers of the Confessional movement suffered from a variety of mental illnesses throughout their lives. Poet John Berryman suffered from deep depression, which eventually led him to take his life in 1973 by jumping from the Washington Street Bridge while teaching at the University of Minnesota. Robert Lowell suffered from severe bipolar disorder throughout his life; his depressive moods often caused him to be committed to mental hospitals for weeks or months at a time. Lowell described his experiences most notably in his poem from *Life Studies* entitled “Waking in the Blue”:

> The night attendant, a B.U. sophomore,  
> rouses from the mare’s-nest of his drowsy head  
> propped on *The Meaning of Meaning*.  
> He catwalks down our corridor.  
> Azure day  
> makes my agonized blue window bleaker.  
> Crows maunder on the petrified fairway.  
> Absence! My heat grows tense  
> as though a harpoon were sparking for the kill.  
> (This is the house for the “mentally ill.”)¹

The connection between *Brush* and the Confessional movement may not be blatantly apparent from the composition itself; but with background information provided by the composer it becomes more apparent. Smith has suffered most of his life with bipolar disorder, and has suffered from long spells of depressive states; it was during the composition of *Brush* that Smith suffered from depression. It is to be noted that both *Blue Too* and *Two Lights* carry program notes or dedications which point the performer in the direction of inspiration for the piece; with *Blue Too* it is Charles Newcomb and with *Two Lights* it is Two Lights Park in Maine, but *Brush* does not carry any indication.

Well, at the time, I was suffering from depression. I would be lying down, and would literally crawl to the drum set and compose for fifteen minutes and then get exhausted and just crawl back to bed. So, I just didn’t have the wherewithal mentally to think about who to remember.¹

Smith explains that it was during the period of composition of this piece he suffered from serious depression, which required him to compose in very short periods, and caused him to omit any kind of dedication, as he could not think of anyone in which to write for. When looking back at the analysis of the composition and its seemingly erratic nature in a stream of consciousness form, it lends explanation to the character of this piece of music. *Brush*, with the background information on the compositional process from the composer, can be seen as a sonic representation of Smith’s depressive state. The composition’s seemingly irregular tempo and dynamic changes, with sections of never the same duration, though not explicitly described can be interpreted as written as flashes of compositional inspiration from inside of Smith’s depression.

¹ Smith, interview.
CHAPTER IV. TWO LIGHTS (2002)

Two Lights for solo drum set, composed in 2002, is the most recent work for solo drum set by Stuart Saunders Smith. In contrast to his two other works for solo drum set, Smith removes the snare drum from the drum set, and makes a small change from his exclusive use of the standard four-piece drum set. In Two Lights, Smith instructs the performer to remove the snare drum and replace it with a floor tom-tom; this makes the instrumentation change to hi-hat, bass drum, floor tom-tom, medium tom-tom, high tom-tom and a ride cymbal. Smith also changes the implements again, asking for the performer to play the drum set with hard felt timpani mallets; the mallets and tuning of the drums should be articulate enough to make sure that the rhythms can be clearly heard and do not lack definition.

In contrast to Brush, Smith’s Two Lights is far less erratic and relies on the use of repeated material in order to give definition to the composition. The composition is highly sectionalized through the use of changes in instrumentation and tempo. On the large scale, Two Lights can be broken down into a form which alternates between tempos in the form of A B A C A C A B A. The symmetrical form of the piece is not only presented through the changes of tempo, but through distinct use of the instruments in order to illustrate clearly the changes in sections.

Two Lights begins with a section marked with a tempo indication of 60 beats per minute, designated as an A section. It is in the opening that we see the first instance of repeated material; as seen in Example 4.1, Smith presents the same figure in measures 1 and 2.

During this section, Smith makes full use of the drum set, and has a wide variety of dynamics throughout. *Brush* makes no use of repeated material in any sort, whereas the first section of *Two Lights* provides examples of how Smith transforms the opening thematic material. In measure 9, Smith presents a figure similar to that of the opening figure with the progression of quintuplet, sextuplet, septuplet shown in Example 4.2.

EXAMPLE 4.2 Stuart Smith, *Two Lights for drum set*, m. 9.

This figure is then presented once more in this section at the end of measure 11, only this time there is addition of the bass drum to the original rhythmic theme, as seen in Example 4.3.
EXAMPLE 4.3 Stuart Smith, *Two Lights for drum set*, m. 11.

Two other themes run throughout this section, and find themselves used multiple times. At the end of measure 5, is presented with a figure which is written as three quintuplets contained within a half-note triplet rhythm.

EXAMPLE 4.4 Stuart Smith, *Two Lights for drum set*, m. 5.

Within these quintuplets, the rhythm written for the tom-toms remain rhythmically the same, while the lower voices become offset by a sixteenth note every time it is repeated; this same concept is seen again at the beginning of measure 10. The rhythmic change in the tom-tom rhythm can be seen in Example 4.5.
EXAMPLE 4.5 Stuart Smith, *Two Lights for drum set*, m. 10.

The third theme in this section can be found in measure 17, as Smith repeats the same material twice at different dynamic levels.

EXAMPLE 4.6 Stuart Smith, *Two Lights for drum set*, m. 17.

The second section of *Two Lights* starting at measure 19 moves to the tempo of 48 beats per minute, is sparse in rhythmic activity, and contains no repeated materials. The important aspect of this section is the use of the hi-hat; only in the sections marked at the slower tempo is the hi-hat used for crashes as opposed to closed playing. This section consists of very low dynamic levels, only deviating from incredibly soft dynamics for the duration of an eighth note.

The second A section is presented with the return to a tempo of 60 beats per minute and a new theme. The new theme is presented at the beginning of measure 20, and is repeated in the same manner as themes in the first A section.
This section is much shorter than that of the first A section and only lasts for four measures before moving to the next section. It is in this section that the performer reaches the highest dynamic of the composition of fortissississimo.

The C section beginning at measure 25, marked as 69 beats per minute, is a clear deviation from the material found in all of the compositions of the trilogy so far, as it does not contain any polyrhythmic devices. The C section is marked by use of the bass drum and toms in only sixteenth-note rhythms. The dynamics also do not change at all during this section; they remain at a mezzoforte through the entire section, and do not diverge for the entirety of the section. This is interrupted by a third truncated A section, with another instance of a figure being repeated twice at different dynamics.

The A section is then followed by a second C section which this time stays within the metric constraints of quarter-note triplets throughout the entirety of the section. In this section, Smith
provides contrast from the first C section by instructing the performer to play part of it with their fingers at mezzoforte.

The remainder of the piece can be seen as a miniature of the first section, followed by a measure of coda material. At measure 36, the return of the 60 beats per minute tempo introduces the fourth A section which only lasts for three measures before moving to the B section of 48 beats per minute. The B section is once again characterized by more sparse rhythmic activity and the use of hi-hat for crashes instead of closed playing. During the final A section, Smith again makes use of the quintuplet within a triplet rhythm, only this time he does not move the bass drum rhythm but makes a variation on the original figure in the higher voices. The final A section also contains no dynamic change, setting the dynamic at forte at the end of B section and continuing to the coda. The coda is only one measure in length, and is the only point in the piece in which the ride cymbal is used. The performer is instructed to play the ride cymbal with the wooden handle of the timpani mallet and to play the high tom-tom with the head of the mallet.

The larger scale form of the piece can be broken down into three main sections: the first consists of A B A, the second is C A C, and the last is again A B A followed by a short coda. This can be seen as a ternary form within a ternary form, and is illustrated graphically in the diagram in Figure 4.1.
Two Lights - Stuart Saunders Smith
Form diagram

\[
\begin{array}{cccc|cccc|cccc}
\underline{\text{=60}} & \underline{\text{=48}} & \underline{\text{=60}} & \underline{\text{=69}} & \underline{\text{=60}} & \underline{\text{=69}} & \underline{\text{=60}} & \underline{\text{=48}} & \underline{\text{=60}} \\
\end{array}
\]

- A sections characterized by use of repeated rhythmic themes.
- B sections characterized by exclusive use of hi-hat crashes.
- C sections characterized by no change in rhythmic base throughout.

Fig 4.1 Form diagram of Stuart Saunders Smith’s Two Lights for solo drum set.
Analysis of Confessional Content and Influence

Included with Two Lights is a program note that explains the inspiration and source material for the composition of the solo:

Two Lights is meant to evoke Two Lights State Park in Cape Elizabeth, Maine. It is a very dramatic landscape with huge cliffs thrust into and onto the sea. The result is great sprays of waves exploding in the air like water fireworks. The sound is low with a still lower pedal point. As a young person I spent many hours learning the nature of pitch and rhythm from this sculptured world.1

It is here that we once again find the life of Smith’s work, coming through the idea put forth by Phillips’ concept that “poetry is written in the open language of ordinary speech.” Smith writes this piece to bring forth the ideas of rhythm, which he learned from the natural rhythms of the sea and nature while spending his childhood at Two Lights State Park, again calling back to his concepts of polyrhythms as some of the most natural rhythms, due to the many polyrhythms found within our bodies.

This composition also works on the theme of striving “for personalization rather than universalization.” It is through this composition that Smith works to create a sonic landscape of memory, rather than to create something that is universally understood and known. He uses the drum set to portray memories of a specific place and time instead of trying to compose what is a universally known human truth; this gives the listener insight into a personal experience.

Similarly, this can be compared to Blue Too in its representation of hard bop drum set playing, and his formative educational experiences with Charles Newcomb. It is through his sonic exploration of personal experience that Smith gives us a view of life experience with frankness,

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1 Stuart Smith, Two Lights for drum set (Baltimore: Sonic Art Editions, 2003), program notes.
instead of trying to write composition in generalities in the way that Modernists wrote in the
manner of being “ambiguous, allusive, symbolic, and impersonal.”²

CHAPTER V. CONCLUSION

The coherence of the three works for drum set by Stuart Saunders Smith as a trilogy through form comes less from a replication of identical form in each composition; rather, it is a result of how Smith uses dynamics, tempo and rhythm in order to create form. Through dynamics, rhythmic complexity, and changes in tempo, he creates intelligible form in the three works. In Blue Too, it is primarily through the emphasis on dynamics that Smith creates a sectionalized piece through what at first glance may seem highly erratic patches of compositional construction. Through changes in tempo, Brush is found to be a highly sectionalized piece of literature, with the changes in tempo defining the character in each of the sections. Two Lights is found to be sectionalized through tempo and the use repeated materials, which gives awareness to the composer’s intended sections of the composition.

In addition to the similarities in treatment of dynamics, tempo and rhythm in order to create sectionalized composition, Smith works to create quite different sonic space in each of the compositions of the trilogy. In each of his compositions for drum set, Smith works to mark them as joined through the use of the drum set but separate through the soundscape that they create by adopting different styles of drum set playing.

The first one uses sticks, and is from hard bop tradition. The second uses brushes and that’s from a more free form tradition. The third one uses timpani mallets and that’s a certain type of melodic playing that you hear from certain drummers. Although each of the pieces presents different sounds, they all use the drum set in a way which Smith associates to different schools of drum set playing; Blue Too portrays hard bop, Brush portrays the free-form tradition, and Two Lights a melodic style. Each serves as a vignette of different styles of playing, which Smith adopts, but they remind the listener that it is not mere

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1 Smith, interview.
imitation that he attempts to create but “it’s how I play drum set. Those are improvisations coming form my body rhythms.”

Coherence of Smith’s three works for drum set through autobiography as confession comes from their relevance to the virtues of Confessionalism set forth by Phillips in *The Confessional Poets*. As seen with the three works for drum set, each of them fulfills a role in the concepts put forth by Phillips, and each of them has a tinge of Confessionalism. In *Blue Too*, it is noted that through the use of the vernacular of the hard bop tradition, Smith taps into the life of American culture and shows that the composition is “*written in the open language of ordinary speech.*” With information from the composer, we find that *Brush* communicates well the struggles of depression, through its erratic sections and changes in tempo; this shows that Smith fulfills another Confessional cornerstone through addressing, whether intentionally or unintentionally, the theme of mental illness. Finally, it is again seen in *Two Lights* that Smith has “*written in the open language of ordinary speech,*” through the use of the natural rhythms he experienced during his formative years in Maine.

Reaching into both the formal analysis and the characteristics of Confessionalism, it can be seen that Smith realizes an important underpinning of Confessionalism through his compositions: that they are “*written in open forms.*” Smith may imitate other forms, but he never completely adheres to any specific form in any of his works for drum set. It is only through the creation of a new form, like that of Berryman’s extended sonnet, that Smith can fully realize what he intends to portray. These three compositions represent a progression of events in the life of Smith, beyond the fact that they were created chronologically. They exist as snapshots that portray the personal space and struggles of the composer, in the same manner as the works of the Confessional authors.

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2 Smith, interview.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX A. TELEPHONE INTERVIEW WITH STUART SAUNDERS SMITH

Telephone Interview with Dr. Stuart Saunders Smith. February 4th, 2014.

MT - How would you describe your musical background?

SS - I started formal training in percussion when I was six with Charles Newcomb and I studied with him through high school. In elementary school, and middle school, and high school, I played in band Monday, Wednesday, Friday, and orchestra Tuesday and Thursday. So, I had that going as well. Then, I studied for a year at the Berklee School of Music focusing on percussion and arranging. I went for three years to the Hartt College of Music as a percussion performance major. Then, I got my master’s the next year, and moved on to get a DMA in composition with minor in percussion performance.

MT - Who would you say influenced your compositional style the most, or what did?

SS - Well, I learned a lot about composition with Charles Newcomb. Part of each lesson was reading music and improvising within various styles, like rumba, tango, swing, dixieland, etc. He would play piano, I would play the drum set. Composing for me has always been a way of improvising slowly, so I would I say that improvising influenced me compositionally as much as anything did.

MT - Do you feel that you have influences from literature that influence your composing?
SS - Well, I remember what [Willem] de Kooning said once when he was asked what in the past influenced him; he said “I influence the past.” It’s a two-way street. Music that a person makes influences strings of music that are historical as well as using historical music as an influence.

MT - I really like the idea of composing as slow improvisation, do you feel your selection of notes and polyrhythmic structures comes from improvisation?

SS - Yes.

MT - Is there anything that attracted you to specific rhythms or specific notes?

SS - Yes, the human body is an extraordinarily complex polyrhythmic system. You have the heart beating a certain speeds at certain times, the stomach does the same, all of the other organs have their own rhythms. So, polyrhythms are natural and metered rhythms are not natural.

MT - Could you talk about the “confessional composer,” do you feel that you were influenced by writers of the movement?

SS - I think that one of the problems one has in using the word influence is that it implies a historiography of “this then that,” instead of a less linear truth. Of
course I was aware of Transcendentalist literature growing up in New England we were taught that in high school very rigorously; we knew those authors. Later on, we knew confessional authors. So, coming out of New England those things were part of our intellectual architecture. But was I influenced on a one to one basis? You know, “oh my goodness, I’m going to be influenced by this,” I don’t think any composer or literary person worth his or her salt works that way. This part of your educational experience, and that word “experience” is very important. I use in my work, the experience of working.

MT - So you feel it’s more of a collective of experience and knowledge...?

SS - Yes, that would be a good way of putting it.

MT - I have a couple questions, specifically about your drum set works. The first solo, Blue Too, is separated by a number of years from the other two. Do you feel that even though they are separated by a length of time and they may have different vocabulary, that they should be put together as a trilogy?

SS - That’s how I prefer that they’re performed. Of course, they can be performed as a single solo on a program. The first one uses sticks, and is from hard bop tradition. The second uses brushes and that’s from a more free form tradition. The third one uses timpani mallets and that’s a certain type of melodic playing that you hear from certain drummers.
MT - Does how you use the drum set reflect how others have played the drum set or is it something completely separate?

SS - No, it’s how I play drum set. It’s how I play drum set. Those are improvisations coming from my body rhythms.

MT - *Two Lights* and *Brush* were written in 2002 and 2003. What after a number years, made you want to come back to the drum set?

SS - I just felt that at the time that I had more to say about the drum set and its position in the world. I was thinking that *Blue Too* would open people’s imagination, [for] others to write for the instrument and that didn’t happen. I felt like I had more to say and I wrote those other two pieces later on as part of the suite of three.

MT - *Blue Too* has a dedication, and *Two Lights* is written about Two Lights Park. However, *Brush* doesn’t have any dedication or description. Did you feel it wasn’t necessary?

SS - Well, at the time I was suffering from depression. I would be lying down, and would literally crawl to the drum set and compose for fifteen minutes and then get exhausted and just crawl back to bed. So, I just didn’t have the wherewithal mentally to think about who to remember.
MT - I think that may be all the questions I have.

SS - Okay, I think that I just want to emphasize that we have this “influence” game of this thing leading to that and everybody has to be influenced by this, that, or the other thing. I think that there is of course that, but if you talk about someone’s educational experience they of course are going to be influenced by that geography, but how they move in that geography, that mental space, is highly creative if given enough time and enough talent. You don’t want influence to explain away talent, because that’s what happens right? “Oh, I was influenced by John Cage.” Really? I knew him, but in what way?

MT - Kind of gives credit to the other person?

SS - Yeah, it explains away the music rather than being helpful.
APPENDIX B. NOTICE OF HSRB REVIEW

DATE: December 2, 2013

TO: Matthew Timman
FROM: Bowling Green State University Human Subjects Review Board

PROJECT TITLE: [543050-1] THE DRUM SET WORKS OF STUART SAUNDERS SMITH AS A CORRELATIVE TRILOGY THROUGH COMPOSITIONAL UNITY AND AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL CONTENT AS CONFESSION

SUBMISSION TYPE: New Project

ACTION: HSRB APPROVAL NOT NEEDED

DECISION DATE: December 2, 2013

Thank you for your submission of New Project materials for this project. The Bowling Green State University Human Subjects Review Board has determined this project does not meet the definition of human subject research under the purview of the HSRB according to federal regulations.

We encourage you to continue to confirm with the HSRB whether future projects of this nature require review.

We will retain a copy of this correspondence within our records.

If you have any questions, please contact the Office of Research Compliance at 419-372-7716 or hsrbo@bsu.edu. Please include your project title and reference number in all correspondence regarding this project.

This letter has been electronically signed in accordance with all applicable regulations, and a copy is retained within Bowling Green State University Human Subjects Review Board's records.