‘Those Times’: Politics, Culture, and Confession in the Poetry of Anne Sexton

Melanie Waters

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Supervisor: Professor Linda Anderson

Abstract

This thesis constitutes the first sustained attempt to situate the poetry of Anne Sexton in relation to postwar American politics. While there has been a recent resurgence of academic interest in the politics of mid-century confessional literature, the current crop of poetry scholarship throws focus on the work of Robert Lowell, John Berryman, and Sylvia Plath, and has hitherto neglected to examine the ways in which Sexton's creative praxis might be productively re-examined alongside contemporary critical theory and postwar political history. In the following chapters, I interrogate the received status of Sexton's poetry as psychic theatre and demonstrate the terms of its political engagement through a detailed analysis of its referential framework, which is, I argue, structured around key crises in post-war American history: the legacy of the Holocaust; the Cold War; the Vietnam conflict, and the rise of feminism. More explicitly, I explain how these historical paroxysms are registered in the metrical arrangements of Sexton's poems. Through reference to the work of Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan, and Cathy Caruth, I locate her writing within the psychoanalytic discourse of trauma, in which the traumatic event – though not perceived fully at the time of its occurrence – is unconsciously re-experienced, or 'acted-out', through the repetitive, compulsive, and automatic mechanisms of the subject's speech and behaviour. My thesis thus positions Sexton's poetry as a mode of acting-out, in which the socio-political upheavals of the twentieth century are not only expressed in directly referential terms, but are also woven into the formal fabric of the poetry itself. In addition, the following chapters show how the political lineaments of Sexton's poetry might be usefully illuminated through reference to the Cold War ideology of 'containment' and the interlocking, if vexed, economies of privacy, conformity, and contamination.

Table of Contents

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This thesis is dedicated to my grandmother, Violet Thoburn.

Introduction

This thesis represents the first sustained attempt to situate the poetry of Anne Sexton in relation to postwar American politics. Despite a recent resurgence of academic interest in the 'confessional' poetics of Sexton and her peers, the political dimensions of her writing have yet to be recuperated to contemporary criticism. This conspicuous analytical oversight can be ascribed, in part, to the play of two discrete but interlocking factors that have exerted a de-politicizing influence upon the field of study. Firstly, female confessional poetry has been constructed, within the terms of traditional critical thought, as an apolitical practice. As a female confessional poet and a suicide, therefore, Sexton is a figure whose work has tended to be read retroactively through the lens of her depression and, more specifically, her self-inflicted death. Consequently, the writing has been divorced from its broad frame of (political) reference, and reformulated as a purely solipsistic enterprise – the scope of which has tended to be confined to the narrow parameters of the poet's own psychopathology. Secondly, in the case of Sexton, the critical tendency to contract or limit the referential scope of the confessional poem has been facilitated by the profusion and accessibility of information about Sexton's personal life. Much of this information, the majority of which Sexton divulged freely during her lifetime, is brought together in Diane Wood Middlebrook's seminal 1991 biography, written with the support of the poet's eldest daughter and current literary executor, Linda Gray Sexton. In addition to drawing on published volumes of poetry, prose, letters, and interviews, Middlebrook makes controversial use of her subject's medical records and a collection of audiotapes of Sexton's therapy, made by her psychiatrist of eight years, Dr. Martin Orne. As Middlebrook explains in her coda to the study, Sexton fully 'anticipated a biography that would clarify the relationship between her life, her illness, and her work, and she took an active role in making sure that her biographer would draw from . . .

very full documentation, including collections of audiotapes, videotapes, photographs, and film'.[1] While Middlebrook attempts to utilize these resources without adopting 'the perspective of a pathography', they, along with the vast official archive of unpublished journals, correspondence, and notebooks housed at the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center at the University of Texas in Austin, have been implicated repeatedly in the development of psychobiographical strategies of reading.[2] Working within the strictures of these descriptive modes, critics have sought to establish continuities between the experiences delineated in the poems and Sexton's personal biography. Such activity has generated a situation in which Sexton, a self-conscious artist whose poetry continually acknowledges, demonstrates and interrogates the terms of its own textual praxis, has been awkwardly assimilated to the various, constructed personae by whom her poems are spoken. In excavating the structures of Sexton's poetry for these fossils of biographical 'truth', critics have inevitably undermined the status of the poems as sites at which the political, the social, the cultural, and the personal coalesce.

In the following chapters, I explore the received status of Sexton's poetry as psychic theatre and demonstrate the terms of its political engagement through an analysis of its referential framework, which is, I argue, structured around key crises in postwar American history: the legacy of the Holocaust; the Cold War; the Vietnam conflict; and the rise of second wave feminism. I wish to suggest that this deliberate referentiality, this compulsion to connect with the shifting, contemporary world-beyond-the-self, provides lucid evidence of a functioning political consciousness that has hitherto been neglected by Sexton scholars. While I agree with Philip McGowan that saying 'new things about the poetry of Anne Sexton' necessitates a 'concentration on [her] work rather than [her] life', I am less persuaded that this shift of emphasis need not entail any 'sustained [engagement] with critical readings

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[1] Diane Wood Middlebrook, *Anne Sexton: A Biography* (New York: Vintage, 1991), p. 401.
[2] Middlebrook, p. xx.

of Sexton that have positioned the biographical as the key approach to the written word'.[3] Rather, it is my view that saying 'new things' about Sexton's poetry – and setting these insights within a broader academic and cultural framework – ought to entail an acknowledgement of the existing scholarship and the various ways in which it has worked to limit the purview of the poet's writing. In taking account of the critical legacy, then, it is also necessary to make some concession to the constellation of biographical events and figures around which this legacy turns. In essence, while this thesis is sceptical about discourses that deploy biographical 'facts' as tools with which to analyse Sexton's poetry – as well as those that attempt to illuminate the personal life of the writer through reference to her creative output – it also recognizes the inextricability of these factors from the body of the work. I am not in any way proposing that we cannot understand the meaning of the poetry without the biography (I am, in fact, arguing the opposite) but I do believe that it is not possible to understand Sexton's legacy as a confessional poet, the unique space she occupies within the American cultural imaginary, and the circumstances of her de-politicization, without some recourse to 'the facts of her life'.[4] In an effort to lay the foundations for the following study, the next few pages will be dedicated to a brief description of Sexton's life and career, which I will endeavour to situate in relation to confession, performance, gender, and the politics of Cold War America.

Anne Sexton was born Anne Gray Harvey on 9 November 1928, the youngest of three daughters, in the prosperous Boston suburb of Newton. Her father, Ralph Harvey, was the owner of a thriving wool business and her mother, Mary Gray, belonged to an influential

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[3] Philip McGowan, *Anne Sexton and Middle Generation Poetry: The Geography of Grief* (Westport, Connecticut and London: Praeger, 2004), p. x.

[4] This phrase is used by Ted Hughes in a letter he wrote to *The Independent* in response to a flurry of criticism that was prompted by his removal of the headstone from Sylvia Plath's grave after its repeated defacement, and his more general control of his late wife's legacy. 'I hope', states Hughes, 'that each of us owns the facts of his or her own life'. See Ted Hughes, 'Sylvia Plath: The Facts of Her Life and the Desecration of Her Grave', *The Independent*, 20 April 1989. For a fuller discussion of this controversy see Jacqueline Rose, *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath*, 2nd edn. (London: Virago Press, 1996), pp. 65-113 and Tracy Brain, *The Other Sylvia Plath* (London: Longman, 2001), p. 208.

family of Republican politicians and journalists from Maine. Both figures have featured prominently in existing accounts of Sexton's poetry, with critics often assuming a direct and unproblematic correspondence between the cast of mothers and fathers who populate her writing and her own parents. Equally central to the *dramatis personae* that scholars tend to cite in these accounts is Mary Gray's aunt, Anna Ladd Dingley – after whom Anne was named – who came to live with the Harveys when Sexton was eleven. Retired from her job as a magazine editor and herself unmarried, Dingley – or 'Nana', as she was known – had a particularly close relationship with her great niece, for whom she seems to have been a sympathetic and convenient confidante. Certainly, Sexton remembered spending a lot of time with Nana when she was growing up, 'playing cards in her room, doing her homework there, eating lunch with her, and going to the movies with her after school'.[5] While this went on for some time, Nana's mental state became increasingly precarious and in 1944 she was removed from the family home to a private nursing facility nearby. Because of her madness, her name, and her background in writing, Nana was situated by Sexton as a pivotal 'twin' figure in the family psychodrama that she later described in her therapy – the psychodrama which has come to inform so many readings of Sexton's creative work.

In 1948, when Anne was nineteen, she met and eloped with Alfred 'Kayo' Sexton, a pre-med student at Colgate University with whom she went on to have two daughters: Linda in 1953 and Joy in 1955. It was directly after Joy's birth that Sexton's psychological health began to deteriorate. With her husband working away, she struggled to take care of two young children and maintain the house, and eventually lapsed into a prolonged and debilitating bout of depression that culminated in an overdose, a spell in a private psychiatric hospital, and the brisk removal of Linda and Joy to the homes of various sets of relatives. It

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[5] Middlebrook, p. 15.

was during this time in hospital, Westwood Lodge, that Sexton was first treated by Dr. Orne[6], the son of the female psychiatrist that Sexton consulted in the weeks that followed the birth of Joy. After her discharge from Westwood Lodge, Sexton engaged Orne as her psychiatrist and continued to see him regularly over the course of the next eight years. Though her symptoms were initially linked to post-partum depression, Orne has since explained that they were not consistent enough to form a firm diagnosis:

> [Sexton] was very, very sick, but like many interesting patients didn't fit textbook criteria. I did the diagnostic work on her when she was at the hospital, which indicated that she was hysteric in the classic sense: like a chameleon she could adopt any symptom. She experienced profound dissociation, and she had lesions of memory. Some therapists were convinced that Anne was schizophrenic. I don't doubt that hospitalized in a ward of schizophrenics, she would exhibit their symptoms. . . . She certainly had a depressive illness for many years, which was never really resolved.[7]

It was in the early days of this therapy that Orne suggested Sexton try to do something creative as part of her recovery programme, and he appears as a crucial figure in the writer's subsequent mythologization of her poetic birth:

> I said to my doctor at the beginning, 'I'm no good; I can't do anything; I'm dumb'. He suggested I try educating myself by listening to Boston's educational TV station. He said I had a perfectly good mind. As a matter of fact, after he gave me a Rorschach test, he said I had creative talent that I wasn't using. I protested, but I followed his suggestion. One night I saw I. A. Richards on educational television reading a sonnet and explaining its form. I thought to myself, 'I could do that, maybe; I could try'. So I sat down and wrote a sonnet. The next day I wrote another one, and so forth. My doctor encouraged me to write more. 'Don't kill yourself', he said. 'Your poems might mean something to someone else someday'. That gave me a feeling of purpose, a little cause, something to do with my life, no matter how rotten I was.[8]

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[6] In 1991, Dr. Martin Orne generated a storm of controversy after he released recordings of Sexton's therapy sessions to Middlebrook for use in her biography of the poet – a move which was, at the time, interpreted as a severe breach of the patient's right to confidentiality. As Middlebrook recalls, 'information about the use of the [therapy] tapes became sensational news: "Poet Told All; Therapist Provides the Record" was the headline on the story that ran on page on of *The New York Times*. . . . Before the book was even published, medical ethicists went on the record to charge Dr. Orne with professional misconduct for his perceived violation of doctor-patient privilege. "A patient's right to confidentiality survives death", said one, "only the patient can give that release. What the family wants does not matter a whit"'. See Middlebrook, p. 402. See also Orne's foreword to Middlebrook's biography, p. xiii-xviii.

[7] Middlebrook, p. 39.

[8] Patricia Marx, Interview with Anne Sexton (1966), *No Evil Star: Selected Essays, Interviews, and Prose* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1985), pp. 70-82 (pp. 84-85).

In 1957, Sexton enrolled in a poetry workshop at the Boston Center for Adult Education. The workshop was led by the poet John Holmes, a professor of English at Tufts University, and it was here that she first encountered Maxine Kumin, the writer with whom she would consult most closely over the course of the next seventeen years.[9]

Given the fact that Sexton was urged to write as part of her therapy, it is perhaps unsurprising that the majority of her early work focuses on psychoanalysis, and the dynamic relationship between the processes of the unconscious and creativity. The core concerns of these early days are clearly flagged in titles such as 'Appointment Hour', 'The End of the Illusion', 'One Patient Released Today', 'The Psychosomatic Stomach', and 'One Way of Avoiding the Issue', all of which are inflected by Sexton's growing awareness of psychoanalytic phenomena.[10] This expanding knowledge of psychoanalysis was matched by a burgeoning understanding of poetic technique. Holmes was renowned for his 'technique poems', and Sexton's uses of rhythmic and formal 'tricks' became increasingly sophisticated under his tutelage.[11] Even at this formative stage in her creative development, then, Sexton's poems were marked by formal complexities that advertised the cultivated artifice of her 'confessions', stressing their status as art and, therefore, as anything but unguarded revelations of private 'truths'.

Encouraged by Holmes, Sexton began submitting her poems to magazines and journals in 1957. By April 1958, her efforts were met with tangible success when her lyric

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[9] As well as a productive professional relationship, which resulted in the publication of three books for children, Sexton and Kumin shared in a close and enduring personal friendship. When they first met, they both had young families at home and were often unable to meet in person. As a substitute, they developed a system of work-shopping poems over the phone, and eventually had to have second phone lines installed so they could talk freely and at length. For further discussion of the relationship between Sexton and Kumin see Elaine Showalter and Carol Smith, Interview with Anne Sexton and Maxine Kumin, *No Evil Star: Selected Essays, Interviews, and Prose*, ed. by Steven E. Colburn (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1985), pp. 158-79; Maxine Kumin, 'How It Was: Maxine Kumin on Anne Sexton', *Sexton: Selected Criticism*, ed. by Diana Hume George (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1988), pp. 197-210. See also Anne Sexton and Maxine Kumin, *Eggs of Things* (New York: Putnam, 1963); *More Eggs of Things* (New York: Putnam, 1964); and *The Wizard's Tears* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1975).

[10] Middlebrook, p. 52.

[11] Middlebrook, p. 98.

poem 'Eden Revisited' was published in *The Fiddlehead Review.* The following summer Sexton enrolled in a workshop at the Antioch Writers' Conference, which was led by her then-favourite poet, W. D. Snodgrass. At the time, Snodgrass was best known as the author of 'Heart's Needle' (1959)[12], a poem that Middlebrook identifies as spearheading the rise of the 'confessional' mode within postwar American verse.[13] Setting a divorced father's experience of separation from his young daughter against the backdrop of the Korean War, Snodgrass's poem became another vital point of reference in the story Sexton later told about her professional apprenticeship:

> ['Heart's Needle'] brought me to face some of the facts about my own life. I had lost a daughter, lost her because I was too sick to keep her. After I read the poem . . . I ran up to my mother-in-law's house and brought my daughter home. That's what a poem should do – move people to action. True, I didn't keep my daughter at the time – I wasn't ready. But I was beginning to be ready. I wrote a disguised poem about it, 'Unknown Girl in the Maternity Ward'. . . . [Snodgrass] encouraged me, he liked what I was doing. He was the first established poet to like my work, and so I was driven to write harder and allow myself to tell the whole story.[14]

The subtle intertwining of personal and political themes that takes place in Snodgrass's poem would provide a blueprint for some of Sexton's most interesting and enigmatic poetry – particularly poems like 'My Friend, My Friend', 'Rumpelstiltskin', and the 'Eighteen Days Without You' series, in which she makes respective gestures towards the Holocaust, the Cold War, and the conflict in Vietnam. Following their meeting at Antioch, Snodgrass and Sexton struck up an enduring correspondence. As is clear from the extensive archive at the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, Sexton bombarded Snodgrass with long, effusive

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[12] W. D. Snodgrass, *Heart's Needle* (1959) (Hessle, England: Marvell Press, 1960).
[13] Middlebrook, p. 78.
[14] Barbara Kelves, Interview with Anne Sexton (1975), *No Evil Star: Selected Essays, Interviews, and Prose*, ed. by Steven E. Colburn (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1985), pp. 83-111 (pp. 89-90).

letters from the latter half of 1958 until the following summer – letters which, for the most part, kept him abreast of developments in her personal, as well as her professional, life.[15]

Riding high on the special attention she was receiving from Snodgrass, Sexton applied to join Robert Lowell's writing seminar at Boston University. Describing these sessions in later years, Sexton recalled Lowell's 'slow, line-by-line readings' of the students' poems, explaining how he worked with 'a cold chisel, with no more mercy than a dentist. He got out the decay, but if he was never kind to the poem, he was kind to the poet'.[16]

> Lowell helped me to distrust the easy musical phrase and to look for the frankness of ordinary speech. Lowell is never impressed with a display of images or sounds – those things that a poet is born with anyhow. If you have enough natural imagery, he can show you how to chain it in. He didn't teach me what to put into a poem, but what to leave out. What he taught me was taste – perhaps that's the only thing a poet can be taught.[17]

Again, then, Sexton makes a point of emphasizing the processes that lie behind the construction of the confessional poem; it is something which is chipped away at, stripped down, and painstakingly reshaped – it is not, in other words, 'the truth'.

The technical complexity of Sexton's work is writ large in her first collection, *To Bedlam and Part Way Back*, which was published by Houghton Mifflin in 1960 and includes some of Sexton's most anthologized poems: 'You, Doctor Martin', 'Said the Poet to the Analyst', 'Her Kind', 'Unknown Girl in the Maternity Ward', 'For John, Who Begs Me Not to Enquire Further', and 'The Double Image'. Even at this formative stage in her career, Sexton's poetry was generating widespread critical discussion – discussion which would set the tone for subsequent scholarship by focusing on Sexton's fearlessness in confronting the implied 'facts' of her life, over her technical proficiency as a poet. Following on the success of *Bedlam*, Sexton went on to release *All My Pretty Ones* in 1962 and *Live or Die* in 1966, for

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[15] See, for example, Anne Sexton, *A Self-Portrait in Letters* (1977), ed. by Linda Gray Sexton and Lois Ames (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1991), pp. 35-38; Middlebrook, p. 83.
[16] Kelves, p. 91.
[17] Kelves, pp. 91-92.

which she received a Pulitzer Prize. In 1969 she published *Love Poems*, a sustained exploration of female sexuality in postwar American suburbia, and was also awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship in order to finish her play, *Mercy Street*, which was performed off-Broadway at the American Place Theater in the same year. She went on to write a book of poems based on the work of the Brothers Grimm, entitled *Transformations* (1971), which was the inspiration behind Conrad Susa's 1972 opera of the same name, and is, to date, one of her best-selling works. Sexton published two more collections in her lifetime: *The Book of Folly* in 1972 and *The Death Notebooks* in 1974 – collections which demonstrate her growing engagement with questions of religious faith. Sexton committed suicide at home on October 4, 1974, having just completed the proofreading for her final volume, *The Awful Rowing Toward God* (1975). As Middlebrook describes it, she 'stripped her fingers of rings, dropping them into her big purse, and from the coat closet she took her mother's old fur coat'. Then, '[f]resh glass of vodka in hand, Sexton let herself into the garage and closed the doors behind her. She climbed into the driver's seat of her old red Cougar. . . . She turned on the ignition and turned on the radio'.[18] Two further books of poetry, *45 Mercy Street* and *Words for Dr. Y*, were edited by Linda Gray Sexton and published posthumously in 1976 and 1978 respectively.

As I indicate in the opening chapters of this thesis, Sexton's critical legacy invites consideration alongside that of Sylvia Plath: until very recently, after all, the poetry of each has been used to assist in attempts to 'read' the psychological state of the writer herself. Sexton first became acquainted with Plath when she joined Lowell's seminar in the February of 1959, after moving to Boston with her husband, Ted Hughes, the previous summer. While Plath is regarded by critics as the superior poet, it is clear from Plath's journals that she was both influenced and inspired by Sexton's early writing: '[Lowell] sets me up with Ann (sic)

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[18] Middlebrook, p. 397.

Sexton, an honor, I suppose. . . . She has very good things, and they get better, though there is a lot of loose stuff'.[19] Feeling that her own poems were often '[t]oo forced and rhetorical', she expressed private admiration for Sexton's 'ease of phrase' and 'honesty'.[20] In public, when asked about significant influences on her poetry, she would later cite 'the poetess Anne Sexton, who writes also of her experiences as a mother; as a mother who's had a nervous breakdown, as an extremely emotional and feeling young woman. And her poems are wonderfully craftsmanlike poems, and yet they have a kind of emotional and psychological depth which I think is something perhaps quite new and exciting'.[21] Set in comparison by Lowell, Plath and Sexton took an increasing interest in one another's work, and began spending time together with another poet, George Starbuck, after the seminar. As Sexton recounts in her memoir of Plath, 'The Bar Fly Ought to Sing' (1966):

> [A]fter the class, we would pile in the seat of my old Ford and I would drive quickly through the traffic to, or near, the Ritz. I would always park illegally in a LOADING ONLY ZONE, telling them gaily, 'It's okay, because we are only going to get loaded!' . . . Often, very often, Sylvia and I would talk at length about our first suicides; at length, in detail and in depth between the free potato chips. . . . We talked death with burned-up intensity, both of us drawn to it like moths to an electric light bulb.[22]

The shadow of Plath looms large in the following study, not only because of the common themes with which she and Sexton are concerned, but also because her work has been a test case for the critical methodology I bring to bear upon Sexton's poetry in the course of the next three chapters. This thesis, indeed, is indebted to recent critical studies of Plath's poetry by Jacqueline Rose, Christina Britzolakis, Elisabeth Bronfen, Tracy Brain, and Robin Peel – studies which have acknowledged the complicated and problematic relationship between

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[19] Sylvia Plath, *The Journals of Sylvia Plath, 1950-1962*, ed. by Karen V. Kukil (London: Faber and Faber, 2000), p. 475.
[20] Plath, *Journals*, p. 477.
[21] Plath qtd. in Al Alvarez, 'Sylvia Plath', *The Art of Sylvia Plath*, ed. by Charles Newman (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1970), p. 62. See also Middlebrook, p. 105.
[22] Anne Sexton, 'The Bar Fly Ought to Sing', *No Evil Star: Selected Essays, Interviews, and Prose*, ed. by Steven E. Colburn (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1985), pp. 6-13 (p. 7).

Plath's life and poetry; studies, moreover, which foreground the need for new, and similarly nuanced, analyses of Sexton's confessionalism.

Just as scholars have identified the complex mythology which has grown up around the life and work of Plath, I would like to argue that Sexton is encircled by her own enigmatic lore, which any contemporary analysis of her writing must necessarily take into account.[23] Central to this lore is the charismatic Sexton persona – a 'public performance of the stellar female poet' – which has been described in countless scholarly treatments of the poet's work.[24] This persona, according to Bronfen, was the product of Sexton's self conscious attempts to '[fashion] herself into a marketable image', and it relied in no small part on her compelling physical presence, which jarred dramatically with the sedate milieux of the Boston literary circles in which she moved.[25] It is this presence that Kumin was moved to reflect upon when recalling her first encounter with Sexton at Holmes's poetry workshop in 1957:

> Anne Sexton, as I remember her on our first meeting in the late winter of 1957, tall, blue-eyed, stunningly slim, her carefully coifed dark hair decorated with flowers, her face skilfully made up, looked every inch the fashion model. . . . Earrings, bracelets, French perfume, high heels, matching lip and fingernail gloss bedecked her, all intimidating sophistications in the chalk-and-wet-overshoes atmosphere of the Boston Center for Adult Education.[26]

Sexton's physical appeal was augmented by a 'flamboyant, and provocative, almost exhibitionist manner' that became most pronounced during her poetry readings.[27] According to Middlebrook, the poet's behaviour at these readings was just as studied as her appearance: 'She would saunter to the podium, light a cigarette, kick off her shoes, and in a throaty voice say, "I'm going to read a poem that tells you what kind of a poet I am, what kind of woman I

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[23] See Rose, pp. 1-11.
[24] Elisabeth Bronfen, *The Knotted Subject: Hysteria and Its Discontents* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), p. 291.
[25] Bronfen, p. 291.
[26] Kumin, p. 197.
[27] Bronfen, p. 292.

am, so if you don't like it you can leave". Then she would launch into her signature poem, "Her Kind"".[28] For Sexton, these public appearances were not only stressful, but also traumatic. In a short essay entitled 'The Freak Show', published in the *American Poetry Review* in 1973, Sexton aligned the professional poetry reading to the commercial exhibition of extraordinary bodies. What Sexton here identifies is the audience's desire for the poet to be 'a little alien, a little crazy', as a way of confirming their sense of the artist's inherent *difference*:

> You are the freak. You are the actor, the clown, the oddball. . . . Some people come to see what you look like, what you have on, what your voice sounds like. Some people secretly hope your voice will tremble (that gives an extra kick). Some people hope you will do something audacious, in other words (and I admit to my greatest fears) that you vomit on the stage or go blind, hysterically blind or actually blind. . . . I ask all you poets what in hell are we doing to ourselves – why are we making ourselves into freaks when we are really some sort of priest or prophet or hermit.[29]

In Sexton's view, the poet, like the freak, is contracted to display his or her difference to a paying audience. By the time Sexton came to write 'The Freak Show', just months before her death in 1974, she had struggled through fourteen years of professional appearances, academic interviews, and public readings. As I already mentioned, Sexton, like most poets, found these engagements stressful, and attempted to compensate for the 'three weeks [they would take] out of [her] life'[30] by charging sums that were, by her own admission 'preposterous'.[31] From 1961, Sexton increased her reading fees steadily and regularly. After only one year as a published poet, she was receiving $250 per reading, and by 1968, she was charging $1000 for college readings that usually paid in the region of $150.[32]

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[28] Middlebrook, p. xix.
[29] Anne Sexton, 'The Freak Show', *No Evil Star: Selected Essays, Interviews, and Prose*, ed. by Steven E. Colburn (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1985), pp. 33-40 (p. 33).
[30] Kelves, p. 108.
[31] Sexton, 'The Freak Show', p. 33.
[32] Middlebrook, pp. 152; 319.

While Sexton repeatedly professed her hatred of readings, and their transformation of poets into 'freaks', her own readings were renowned for their theatricality. It was precisely this flair for the theatrical that extended her appeal beyond the academic community to 'poetry-avoiders', and which, in turn, made her such a valuable commodity on the literary circuit.[33] According to Sexton in 'The Freak Show', her agent intentionally promulgated tales of her dramatic on-stage behaviour, telling clients '"It's a great show! Really a pow! She cries every time right on stage!"'.[34] In this sense, the Sexton persona became a demanding, if lucrative, yoke – a role she was obliged to act out on demand for her paying clients. Kumin, accordingly, 'hated her readings', believing they diminished the subtleties of the poetry itself: 'They were so melodramatic and stagey. I felt they took away from the marvelous texture of the poems by making them into performances. I hated the way Annie pandered to an audience'.[35] In her essay-memoir of Sexton, Kumin is rather less damning, acknowledging the dizzying impact that her friend's stage presence had on her audience, and the dedicated way in which she 'bared her liver to the eagle in public readings where almost invariably there was standing room only'. For Kumin, her 'presence on the platform dazzled with its staginess, its props of water glass, cigarettes, and ashtray. She used pregnant pauses, husky whispers, pseudoshouts to calculated effect. A Sexton audience might hiss its displeasure or deliver a standing ovation. It did not doze off during a reading'.[36] Records such as these offer a profound insight into the performative dimensions of the Sexton persona and, by extension, foreground the performative nature of the confessional poem itself. As Bronfen explains:

> The act of performance emphasizes what is implicit to all intimate poetry: that writing turns the intimate into something exterior, draws a boundary between experience or feeling and expression, creates a distance between the speaker and the persona or self-representation articulating the speaker in the process of poetic transformation.[37]

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[33] Bronfen, p. 292.
[34] Sexton, 'The Freak Show', p. 34.
[35] Kumin qtd. in Middlebrook, p. 306.
[36] Kumin, 'How It Was', p. 199.
[37] Bronfen, p. 292.

The distinction that Bronfen here identifies – between the woman Anne Sexton and the personae she ventriloquizes in the course of the poetic performance – is key to understanding the politics of Sexton's poetry, and yet it is routinely negated in the existing scholarship. Acknowledging that the poet and the speaking persona are not one and the same, after all, requires an attendant admission that the confessional poem is not a line by line transcription of events from the poet's own life, but is instead the product of a complex series of creative negotiations and technical strategies. The vexed, and often antagonistic, relationships between confession, truth, gender, and performance pose questions to which I return repeatedly in the course of this thesis: indeed, it is only by examining the issues these relationships raise that we can begin to understand the circumstances of Sexton's de-politicization and start to develop fresh insights into her spectrum of political concerns.

As well as highlighting the studied artifice of her confessionalism, the Sexton performance, with its excessive and contradictory displays of femininity, also gestured towards the performative dimensions of gender itself. As a poet, after all, Sexton was renowned for her showcasing of the anxieties and discontents that plagued American women in the postwar period, and for her related spotlighting of the fissures that fractured the veneer of the 'ideal' bourgeois family; in performance, however, this critique of Middle America jarred with the coiffed appearance and mannered gestures of the poet herself, who seemed to exhibit all the trappings of the bourgeois femininity to which her works referred.

While this thesis lends sustained consideration to the milieu in which Sexton was writing, it is necessary, at this formative stage, to provide a brief, foundational account of the political and cultural issues by which this milieu was defined. When Sexton began writing poetry in 1956, the United States was riding high on a crest of postwar prosperity. As a result of increased productivity during the years of fighting, the nation emerged from the conflict

with a strong economy, and quickly established itself as a global superpower committed to protecting and pursuing its interests at home and abroad. These interests were organized, for the most part, around the demands of capitalism and the free market. The United States thus positioned itself in direct opposition to the communist, collectivist ideals of its principal adversary: the Soviet Union. Indeed, throughout the 1950s, it was against the Soviet Union – or, more specifically, against an American-authored formulation of the Soviet Union – that the United States defined itself: where the Soviet regime was oppressive, the United States was liberated; where the Soviet economy was based on need, the American economy was propelled by desire and choice; where the Soviet labourer worked for the benefit of the state, the American employee worked in order to pursue his or her chosen way of life. In the period following World War II, then, the United States actively promoted itself as everything the Soviet Union was not, and guarded its borders against communist infiltration accordingly through an aggressively administered policy of containment.

The United States continued to flourish between 1953 and 1961 under the Eisenhower administration. Refusing to grant approval to any radical shifts in policy, Eisenhower pursued a program of conservative economics that was designed to keep the country on an even keel. With low unemployment, the expansion of the military-industrial complex, and thriving construction and manufacturing industries, the United States gave every appearance of being a society of abundance. According to Paul Breslin in *The Psycho-Political Muse*, this apparent abundance led the liberal intellectual establishment 'to hope that . . . American prosperity could absorb everyone into the middle class without any political conflict'.[38] The perceived absence of conflict towards which Breslin here gestures is another staple feature of academic accounts of American society in the 1950s. For Daniel Bell, writing in 1960, 'a rough consensus' had been established 'among intellectuals on political issues: the

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[38] Paul Breslin, *The Psycho-Political Muse: American Poetry Since the Fifties* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1987), p. 3.

acceptance of a Welfare State; the desirability of decentralized power; a system of mixed economy and of political pluralism. In that sense . . . the ideological age has ended'.[39] Irving Howe makes a similar observation in his delineation of Cold War intellectualism in 'This Age of Conformity' (1954):

> Capitalism in its most recent state has found an honored place for the intellectuals; and the intellectuals, far from thinking of themselves as a desperate 'opposition', have been enjoying a return to the bosom of the nation. . . . We have all, even the handful who still try to retain a glower of criticism, become responsible and moderate. And tame.[40]

In retrospect, the 'age of conformity' and consensus to which Howe makes reference might be best understood as a chimera generated by Joseph McCarthy's terrorization of the political left during the early 1950s. Situating communism as an evil that posed a direct threat to liberal democracy and the American way of life, McCarthy, under the sponsorship of the government, set out to evacuate national institutions of any and all communist influence. Those suspected of harbouring radical sympathies were brought before the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC), where they were required to testify to their political beliefs and state whether they were, or ever had been, a member of the Communist Party. With this McCarthyite brand of domestic anticommunism in full swing and the transmission of the HUAC hearings on national television, the beginning of the 1950s was, as Charles Olson has observed, 'a time when suppression for any heresy [was] the order of society'.[41] Understandably, this oppressive climate impacted soundly on the culture of the period: in art, Abstract Expressionist painters like Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko eschewed controversial, political subject matter in favour of formal experimentation, while Olson and

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[39] Daniel Bell, *The End of Ideology: On the Exhaustion of Political Ideas in the Fifties* (New York: The Free Press, 1960), p. 373. See also Breslin, p. 4.
[40] Irving Howe, 'This Age of Conformity' (1954), *Selected Writings, 1950-1990* (New York: Harvest / Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1992), pp. 26-49 (p. 27). For a fuller discussion of Howe's position see Gray, pp. 215-16.
[41] Charles Olson, 'Against Wisdom As Such' (1954), *Collected Prose* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1997), pp. 260-65 (p. 261).

the Black Mountain poets developed a theory of 'projective verse', which explored the relationship between the breath of the individual poet and the formal construction of the poetic line.[42] In both disciplines, then, the emphasis fell less on the politics of content than on the politics of form: the form of the written or visual text *was* its content.

The spirit of these aesthetic manoeuvres is further reflected in New Critical discourses by the likes of Cleanth Brooks, F. R. Leavis, and Robert Penn Warren, which dominated the field of Anglo-American literary studies in the middle decades of the twentieth century. Positioned as an 'objective', near-scientific mode of textual analysis, the New Criticism rose to prominence at a time when college literature departments were trying to professionalize the discipline, and reached its height in the early 1950s. As John Guillory observes, this absorption of New Critical principles into advanced pedagogical frameworks corresponded closely to the canonization of modernist literature, and, more specifically, to the increased prevalence of this literature on college curricula.[43] The modernist text, after all, exemplified the principles of narrative impersonality and aesthetic distance with which the New Criticism was most fundamentally concerned. First and foremost, the New Critics advocated the close examination of literary texts and largely disregarded the critical relevance of factors external to them, such as biography or social and historical context. In this context, the text was viewed as a hermetically sealed network of formal relations that represented a triumph of poetic tradition and technique over the depraved commercialism and secularity that were coming to be synonymous with contemporary mass culture.

In *Sylvia Plath and the Theatre of Mourning*, Christina Britzolakis usefully articulates the relevance of this critical climate to academic considerations of the 1950s poets: 'Becoming a poet in the postwar era increasingly resembled a form of professional *training*

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[42] Charles Olson, 'Projective Verse' (1950), *Collected Prose* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1997), pp. 239-49.
[43] John Guillory, *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), p. 167.

linked with the institutional and curricular study of literature' [emphasis in original].[44] While Sexton did not attend university, she would have been introduced to New Critical thinking under the tutelage of her various, institutionally affiliated mentors: Holmes; Snodgrass; and Lowell, and through her college educated peers: Plath; Kumin; and Starbuck. As Britzolakis points to the academic institutionalization of creative writing in the 1950s, she also identifies its masculine bias, and its tendency to marginalize and undermine the work of female poets: using Adrienne Rich's landmark essay, 'When We Dead Awaken' (1971), as a touchstone, she explains that 'women poets of the 1950s had to apprentice themselves to authoritative male models if they wanted to be taken seriously as poets'.[45] Sexton gestured towards this same gender bias in a 1958 letter to Snodgrass, written at the time she was attending Lowell's seminar, in which she locates concerns about the quality of her writing in relation to her femininity: 'I shall never write a really good poem. I overwrite. I am a reincarnation of Edna St. Vincent [Millay] . . . . I am learning more than you could imagine from Lowell. I am learning what I am not. He didn't say I was like Edna (I do – a secret fear) – also a fear of writing as a woman writes. I wish I were a man – I would rather write the way a man writes'.[46] Sexton's acknowledgement of an intimate connection between gender and writing, and her professed envy of 'the way a man writes', speak directly to the absence of a respected female literary tradition, and to the problems that this absence presented to women poets in the 1950s. Towards the end of the decade, however, as the New Critical emphasis on formal technique gave way to a reinvigorated interest in the politics of experience, a space opened up for the creative re-imagination of issues relating to women. As Donald Hall describes it,

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[44] Christina Britzolakis, *Sylvia Plath and the Theatre of Mourning* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 73.

[45] Britzolakis, p. 71. For a broader consideration of the 'woman poet' in postwar America see Adrienne Rich, 'When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision' (1971), *On Lies, Secrets and Silence: Selected Prose, 1966-1978* (London: Virago Press, 1990), pp. 33-49.

[46] Sexton, *A Self-Portrait in Letters*, p. 40.

poetry became 'more intimate, more emotional, and more irrational',[47] or, in Lowell's definition, more 'raw'.[48] In the context of Cold War anticommunism this new 'raw' poetry – like Abstract Expressionist art – was valued for its seeming exemplification of American freedoms. At the same time, however, certain strands of this 'intimate', 'emotional', and 'irrational' poetry – epitomized, presumably, by the work of the confessional poets – were, in contrast to the rampantly masculine Abstract Expressionist movement, associated negatively with femininity.

With the decline of the 1950s conformity culture and the rise of minority politics in the 1960s, the questions that swirled around women and femininity occupied an increasingly central space in the American imaginary. Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, published in 1963, played a key role in identifying some of these questions by outlining a crisis in female identity, a 'problem that has no name', which Friedan saw as affecting swathes of American women who had been forced to succumb to what she terms 'the feminine mystique'.[49]

> The feminine mystique says that the highest value and the only commitment for women is the fulfilment of their own femininity. It says that the great mistake of Western culture, through most of its history, has been the undervaluation of this femininity. It says this femininity is so mysterious and intuitive and close to the creation and origin of life that man-made science may never be able to understand it. But however special and different, it is in no way inferior to the nature of man: it may even in certain respects be superior. The mistake, says the mystique, the roots of women's troubles in the past is that women envied men, women tried to be like men, instead of accepting their own nature, which can find fulfilment only in sexual passivity, male domination, and nurturing maternal love. . . . Beneath the sophisticated trappings, it simply makes certain concrete, finite domestic aspects of feminine existence . . . into a religion, a pattern by which all women must now live or deny their femininity.[50]

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[47] Donald Hall, *Goatfoot Milktongue Twinbird: Interviews, Essays, and Notes on Poetry, 1970-1976* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1978), p. 22.
[48] Robert Lowell qtd. in Ian Hamilton, *Robert Lowell; A Biography* (New York; Random House, 1982), p. 277; Britzolakis, p. 74.
[49] Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (London: Penguin, 1963), pp. 13-29.
[50] Friedan, p. 38.

In its acknowledgement of the concept of femininity as a major factor in women's oppression, Friedan's text became a cornerstone of second wave feminism. In the years following World War II, women had been bombarded with books, articles, commercials, and TV shows which promoted a narrow, prescriptive account of femininity – an account in which women were only *truly* feminine if they were proficient and contented in their roles as wives, mothers, and homemakers. In short, women were told to sacrifice their educational aspirations and career ambitions for the sake of marriage and motherhood. In the 1960s, a number of feminists argued that the pressure to do this – to be 'truly' feminine – had created a generation of women who were stuck at home feeling stifled, unfulfilled, and disempowered. In her memoir, *Searching for Mercy Street* (1994), Linda Gray Sexton recalls her mother's special engagement with Friedan's writing: 'Though my mother never applied the word "feminist" to herself, when I was fifteen she gave me her copy of . . . *The Feminine Mystique,* complete with her scribbled notes across the pages . . . that showed her identification with the problems Friedan described'.[51] Sexton gives particular voice to these problems in a 1965 interview with Patricia Marx, in which she situates the pressure to conform, to be a good wife and mother, as a major factor in bringing about her first psychological breakdown:

> Until I was twenty-eight I had a kind of buried self who didn't know she could do anything but make white sauce and diaper babies. I didn't know I had any creative depths. I was a victim of the American Dream, the bourgeois middle-class dream. All I wanted was a little piece of life, to be married, to have children. I thought the nightmares, the visions, the demons would go away if there was only enough love to put them down. I was trying my damnedest to lead a conventional life, for that was how I was brought up, and it was what my husband wanted of me. But one can't build little white picket fences to keep nightmares out. The surface cracked when I was about twenty-eight. I had a psychotic break and tried to kill myself.[52]

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[51] Linda Gray Sexton, *Searching for Mercy Street: My Journey Back to My Mother, Anne Sexton* (London: Little, Brown, 1994), p. 98.
[52] Kelves, p. 84.

Sexton's testimony speaks directly to the power of patriarchal ideology, and works to identify its important role in shaping women's personal desires and expectations in the mid-1950s. Patriarchy, of course, was one of second wave feminism's guiding concerns, and functioned as the fulcrum of a series of debates within and beyond the women's movement about power, politics, and the representation of gender in mainstream popular culture.

The politics of representation – and, more specifically, female representation – are essential to Kate Millett's argument in *Sexual Politics* (1970), one of second wave feminism's key texts. Here, Millett proposes that the politicization of female experience is radically contingent upon a revision of the term 'politics' so that the terms of its reference might be extended to encompass the experience of women within patriarchy.[53] For Millett, politics does not only designate 'that relatively narrow and exclusive world of meetings, chairmen, and parties' but also refers to all 'power-structured relationships, arrangements by which one group of persons is controlled by another'.[54] As she proceeds to contend:

> The word 'politics' is enlisted here when speaking of the sexes, primarily because such a word is eminently useful in outlining the real nature of their relative status, historically and at the present. It is opportune, perhaps today even mandatory, that we develop a more relevant psychology and philosophy of power relationships beyond the simple conceptual framework provided by our traditional formal politics. Indeed, it may be imperative that we give some attention to defining a theory of politics which treats of power relationships on grounds less conventional than those to which we are accustomed.[55]

According to Millett's feminist corrective, then, the sexed body is placed in a causative relation to political identity, so 'sex is a status category with political implications'.[56] By extension, the family is ordained as '[p]atriarchy's chief institution'; a 'mirror of and a connection with the larger society; a patriarchal unit within a patriarchal whole'.[57] The poet

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[53] For information on Sexton's engagement with Millett's work see Sexton, *A Self-Portrait in Letters*, p. 366.
[54] Kate Millett, *Sexual Politics* (1970) (London: Virago Press, 1997), p. 23.
[55] Millett, p. 24.
[56] Millett, p. 24.
[57] Millett, p. 33.

and feminist Adrienne Rich has likewise identified the circumscriptions that are wrought upon the concept of politics when it is 'reduced to government, to contests between the empowered, or to petty in-group squabbles'. She, like Millett, demands that the term 'politics' be made to include 'not only the domestic sphere, the places where we lie down with lovers, but all activity not carried on within existing parties, previously institutionalized forms . . . the whole question of power, of ends [which is] left invisible in [conventional] definitions'.[58] While I make use of these redefinitions in my analysis of Sexton's politics, I also register my feeling that the poetry in which I am interested is not accidentally or 'automatically' political.[59] That is to say, it is not political solely as a result of Sexton's socially significant statuses – as woman, mother, wife, and poet – but rather, that its deliberate referentiality, its compulsion to engage critically with these statuses, and with the related issues of privacy, autonomy, justice, and conflict, reveals the machinations of a distinctly political consciousness. In this way, Sexton's poetry is very much reflective of the 'spirit of the time' in which it was produced – a politicized time that Rich goes some way to defining in her writing on the rise of the women's movement in the 1960s:

> [My definition of politics] didn't come simply out of one woman's efforts to live and be human, be sexual, in a woman's body. They came as much from a spirit of the time – the late 1960s – that I absorbed through teaching and activism in an institution where the question of white Western supremacy was already being talked about, where students were occupying buildings and teachers either fled the campus or were in constant meetings and teaching 'liberation' classes . . . through a certain kind of openness and searching for transformed relationships in the New Left, which soon led to thousands of women asking 'the Woman Question' in women's voices. . . . I could feel around me – in the city, in the country at large – the 'spontaneity of the masses' . . . and this was powerfully akin to the experience of writing poetry. Politics as expression of the impulse to create, an expanded sense of what's 'humanly possible' – this, in the late 1960s and early women's movement, was what we tasted, not just the necessities of reactive organizing and fighting back.[60]

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[58] Adrienne Rich, 'Dearest Arturo,' *What is Found There: Notebooks on Poetry and Politics* (London: W. W. Norton and Company, 1993), pp. 22-27 (pp. 23-24).
[59] Deborah Nelson, *Pursuing Privacy in Cold War America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), p. 36.
[60] Rich, 'Dearest Arturo', pp. 24-25.

Rich's acknowledgement of the extent to which the 'spirit of the time' functioned as a political accelerant is pertinent to the discussion of the often subtle ways in which Sexton's writing identifies itself as political. In poems such as 'The Abortion' (1962), 'Menstruation at Forty' (1966), 'In Celebration of My Uterus' (1969), and 'Ballad of the Lonely Masturbator' (1969) Sexton inscribes the most intimate aspects of female experience into a realm of literary representation from which they were previously absent. Dismissed by many critics at the time as base and gratuitous, these poems are revealed, in the wake of second wave feminism, as powerful political gestures.

According to Breslin, the 'psycho-political character of the New Left' that emerged towards the end of the 1950s enabled a correspondence between radical politics and radical poetry which had, in previous times, tended to stall:

> Poets had been saying since Shelley's time that social change requires not only a change in outward conditions, but also the cure of the consciousness. Yet seldom, if ever, has the political left agreed with them to the extent that it did in the 1960s. The most conspicuously new poetry of the period branches in several directions, and it does not always or even usually proclaim itself as self-consciously political. Nonetheless, much of that poetry can be illuminated by a consideration of the cultural and political radicalism with which it often shares not only rhetorical habits but a way of making sense of the world.[61]

Eschewing the 'self-consciously political' modes of more polemical poets such as Amiri Baraka, Robert Duncan, and Denise Levertov, Sexton sets out to process the political through the filter of (fictionalized) personal experience. As she explains to Barbara Kelves in a 1968 interview:

> People have to find out who they are before they can confront national issues. The fact that I seldom write about public issues in no way reflects my personal opinion. I am a pacifist. I sign petitions, etc. However, I am not a polemicist. 'The Fire Bombers' – that's a new poem – is about wanton destruction, not about Vietnam specifically; when Robert Kennedy was killed, I wrote about an assassin. I write about human emotions; I write about interior events, not historical ones. . . . Of course, I

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[61] Breslin, p. 1.

> may change. I could use all the specifics of the war for a backdrop against which to reveal experience, and it would be just as valid as the details I am known by. As for the civil rights issue, I mentioned that casually in a poem, but I don't go into it. I think it's a major issue. I think many of my poems about the individual who is dispossessed, who must play slave, who cries 'Freedom Now', 'Power Now', are about the human experience of being black in this world. A black emotion can be a white emotion. It is a crisis for the individual as well as the nation.[62]

In this fraught summary, Sexton positions her writing equivocally between the poles of individuality and universality, the personal and the political. Acknowledging the ways in which her poetry is conscious of, and informed by, its historical context, Sexton does not self-identify as a political poet, but as a poet of 'human emotions'. By thus embedding the political lineaments of her work in patterns of experience that are manufactured as personal, Sexton gestures towards the inextricability of the individual and the nation – a feature of American writing that Sacvan Bercovitch traces back to Puritan attempts to define the nation by defining the self.[63]

Interestingly, the 'political' poems to which Sexton refers directly in her interview with Kelves – 'The Firebombers' and 'The Assassin' (1968) – have been routinely omitted from critical considerations of her writing. This lack of critical interest is consistent with the dismissive attitude that publishers displayed towards these poems at the time of composition. 'The Assassin,' a persona poem about Sirhan Sirhan's assassination of Robert Kennedy in 1968, was refused publication by Howard Moss of *The New Yorker* despite the fact that he 'loved it'.[64] The controversy appears to have arisen as a result of the fact that Sexton 'USED THE SUBJECT' to convey the psychology of killing.[65] In 1972, during Sexton's lecturing stint at Colgate University, the poem remained uncollected, and she commented to her students that *The New Yorker* 'didn't print it [because] it upset them and they were afraid of

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[62] Kelves, pp. 110-11.
[63] See Sacvan Bercovitch, *The Puritan Origins of the American Self* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), pp. 1-34.
[64] Sexton, *A Self-Portrait in Letters*, p. 332.
[65] Sexton, *A Self-Portrait in Letters*, p. 332.

public reaction: anger, distaste, a kind of revulsion on the part of the reader that one could take such immediate news which now we see historically and look at the villain's heart and speak for him'.[66] While, as Cary Nelson has observed, *The New Yorker* was not renowned for being 'politically courageous,' it did have a reputation for publishing 'serious political writing' that did not shy away from controversy. John Hersey's *Hiroshima* (1946), James Baldwin's 'Letter from a Region of My Mind' (1962), and Hannah Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (1963) were all first published in *The New Yorker*.[67] Read alongside these powerful socio-political critiques, it seems surprising that Sexton's persona poem would have been expected to make much of an impact on the reading public.[68] The other possibility is that *The New Yorker* was reluctant to publish a political poem by Anne Sexton – a possibility that is made all the more likely by the fact that Moss would also reject 'The Firebombers', Sexton's poem about Vietnam.[69] Although, in Middlebrook's view, 'The Firebombers' is rendered weak by a censoriousness that is discontinuous with Sexton's 'psychoanalytic' outlook, its tender, contemplative tone – which is sustained until the final three lines – marks out the unique intensity of her empathetic engagement with the victims of American aggression. Sexton was herself sceptical about the success of the poem, and when *Look* magazine expressed an interest in printing it as part of an article it was running on Sexton, she was dismissive. In a letter to Lois Ames she wrote that the *Look* journalist 'wants to use something new and, I think, something to show I care about the world, the war and all that temporary crap. I do care, but I don't think caring is the same as good writing'.[70] Sexton's dramatic rejection of the war as 'temporary crap' cuts right to the heart of her poetic aim,

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[66] Anne Sexton, Crawshaw Lectures (2) (1972), p. 2. HRHRC, Box 16, folder 5.
[67] See John Hersey, *Hiroshima* (1946) (London: Vintage, 1989), James Baldwin, 'Letter from a Region of My Mind' (1963), *The Fire Next Time* (Middlesex: Penguin, 1964), and Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (1963) rev. edn. (New York: Penguin, 1994).
[68] Cary Nelson, *W. S. Merwin: Essays on the Poetry* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1987), p. 121.
[69] Middlebrook, pp. 296-97.
[70] Sexton, *A Self-Portrait in Letters*, p. 327.

which was, it seems, to develop a poetics of permanence, something that would withstand the vagaries of history. Certainly, Sexton was anxious that her poetry should be able to transcend the specificities of time and place, even when it was engaged with these particular details. Referring to 'December 9th' from her 'Eighteen Days Without You' sequence, in which the speaker addresses a lover who unloads 'the bodies of men / out at Travis Air Force / Base' during the Vietnam war, Sexton expressed concerns that 'in a hundred years, people will have to look up the war in Vietnam. They will have mixed it up with the Korean or God knows what else'.[71] The strategy by which Sexton attempted to circumvent this problem of specificity was, as I have already established, one of personalization. By rendering the personal dimensions of political situations immediate to the reader, Sexton was able to create poetry that went beyond the 'temporary' particulars of politics, while remaining contemporarily engaged.

Sexton's personal letters provide ready proof of her ongoing interest in the theatre of international politics. From 1966, following the intensification of the American bombing campaign in Vietnam in 1965, Sexton registered her objection to the war through her participation in a series of antiwar poetry readings. Writing to Philip Legler about one such 'vast' event (at the Sanders Theater, Harvard) she commented that 'I expect they will throw eggs, or my husband (the republican who hates my pink – he calls it – politics) says they may throw hand-grenades'.[72] It was at this particular reading that Sexton read a poem she had written for her daughter, Linda, entitled 'Little Girl, My String Bean, My Lovely Woman'. For Rich, a co-organizer of the protest, the significance was profound:

> [Y]ou cannot imagine the impact that poem had. Bly and others were reading poems describing various people in the government; there were poems about napalmed babies and so on. Then Anne got up and read this poem for her daughter – so out of kilter with the occasion in one sense, and in another sense so completely the right

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[71] Kelves, p. 111.
[72] Sexton, *A Self-Portrait in Letters*, p. 290.

> thing. It was about life and surviving. It made people rather uncomfortable, but she was completely self-possessed.[73]

There can be no doubt that Sexton's involvement in literary and academic life in the 1960s strengthened the terms of her political affiliation – a fact that is supported by the increased incidence of political references in her writing from the mid-1960s onwards. The invasion of Czechoslovakia by Soviet troops in August of 1968 caused Sexton to wonder to a friend if 'Joe McCarthy is right (was) and Communism is a great peril. I have never thought they'd fight and take over like Hitler. . . . By the time you get this God knows what will have happened'.[74] Despite the hysterical timbre of Sexton's speculation, her views, for the most part, were liberal, pacifistic, and set in radical contrast to those of her husband, Kayo. In a letter to a friend she complained that '[l]ast year, he [Kayo] had a sign in his car that said "Register Communists, Not Firearms". I didn't say much, but I was ashamed. Then he put an American flag sticker on the car'.[75] For Sexton, then, domestic politics were explicitly domestic; broad political conflicts were played out in the dynamic context of the family, within the space of the home.

This thesis comprises three parts and a conclusion. Each part is, in turn, subdivided into a number of shorter chapters. Part one deals explicitly with Sexton's critical legacy and the implications of the confessional epithet with which her poetry is so insistently identified. With close reference to Sexton's poetry, letters, articles, and interviews, in addition to a variety of unpublished documents viewed at the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, I set out to challenge readings of Sexton that utilize the biographical as a tool for understanding the writing itself. In pursuit of this objective, the chapters in this opening section focalize the self-reflexive technical strategies that characterize Sexton's poems; viewed through the lens of these strategies, the confessional poem is no longer

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[73] Middlebrook, p. 296.
[74] Sexton, *A Self-Portrait in Letters*, p. 330.
[75] Sexton, *A Self-Portrait in Letters*, p. 366.

comprehensible as a straightforward translation of subjective experience and must be understood, instead, as an artful – and ultimately fictional – construction. By engaging with a broad range of theoretical perspectives, these chapters work to analyse the currency of confession in postwar American culture, and thus attempt to locate Sexton's creative praxis in a wider social and political context. Spotlighting Sexton's poems about therapy, they trade on debates within psychoanalysis – and the theories of Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan in particular – in order to resituate the confession as an inherently unstable disclosure, the truth value of which is always in question. This part of the thesis draws to a close with a consideration of the longstanding links between confession and feminist practice, and the relationship of poetry to the women's movement. Anchoring Sexton's creative practice in the distinct geopolitical and cultural context of postwar America, I go on to propose that Sexton's poetry might be productively reconsidered alongside feminist correctives to patriarchal formulations of the political, which attempt to take account of women's marginalization within existing power structures.

The chapters in the second part of this thesis explore Sexton's creative engagement with the Holocaust through the detailed analysis of several poems, including 'My Friend, My Friend' (1959), 'Flee On Your Donkey' (1966), 'KE 6-8018' (1966), 'Hansel and Gretel' (1971), and 'After Auschwitz' (1974). Written at various stages in her career, these poems not only attempt to inscribe the difficulty of this subject matter at the level of reference, but also at the level of form. To this end, they display a range of metrical eccentricities that register the difficulties of converting the Holocaust into poetry, and which, in my view, might be usefully reconsidered alongside recent theoretical discourses on aesthetics, psychoanalysis, and trauma. By making special reference to models of psychic disturbance developed by Freud, the French psychologist Pierre Janet, and Cathy Caruth, I show how Sexton's post-Holocaust poetry enacts the obsessive, repetitive, and inflexible characteristics

that are commonly associated with traumatic response. Furthermore, through reference to key works by Theodor Adorno, Hilene Flanzbaum, and Lawrence L. Langer that examine the questions and controversies that swirl around attempts to aestheticize the Holocaust, I endeavour to trace the ways in which Sexton and her contemporaries – Plath, Lowell, and John Berryman, in particular – have deployed Jewishness as a metaphor for generic experiences of marginalization and victimization in the post-Holocaust period.

In the third and final part of this thesis, I view Sexton's poetry in relation to the postwar ideology of containment and the interlocking, if vexed, economies of conformity, privacy, and self-disclosure. Taking recourse to scholarly theorizations of Cold War culture outlined in Elaine Tyler May's *Homeward Bound* (1988), Deborah Nelson's *Pursuing Privacy in Cold War America* (2002), and Andrew Ross's *No Respect: Intellectuals and Popular Culture* (1989), I explore the domestic permutations of containment ideology and indicate how they might begin to illuminate Sexton's efforts to articulate crises within the family and the home. More broadly, by foregrounding the tensions between inside and outside, order and chaos, and private and public around which the doctrine of containment is organized, I identify the ways in which it also inflects Sexton's representation of institutional space in poems like 'You, Doctor Martin' (1960), 'The Operation' (1962), and 'Flee On Your Donkey' (1966). The chapters in this section also consider the rise of literary subjectivism in the context of Cold War culture and, in doing so, they aim to posit Sexton's poems as sites of rupture where the containment of 'private' experience fails, but at which the *order* of containment is re-asserted at the level of form. In other words, the disclosure of personal information that takes place within the space of the confession is countervailed by the enclosure of this personal information within the formal scheme of the poetic text. Extending this line of thought, I examine Cold War anxieties about contamination in relation to Julia Kristeva's concept of

abjection, and suggest the ways in which these anxieties manifest themselves in Sexton's treatment of the mother-daughter relationship.

PART ONE: THE POLITICS OF CONFESSION

1. Theorizing Confession

According to Michel Foucault in *The History of Sexuality* (1976), the confession has installed itself at the heart of religious, legal, and social discourses as 'one of the West's most highly valued techniques for producing truth'.[1] Articulated by the subject to whom it refers, the confession is widely valorized for its putative veracity. As a result of its perceived truth value, and its consequent centrality to existing systems of power, the confession is always and already a political gesture, and as such it is inextricable from issues of authority, order, and legitimacy.

The politics, history, and dynamic cultural currency of confessional speech have been compellingly excavated in recent works by Peter Brooks and Deborah Nelson, and it is through recourse to this scholarship that the role of personal testimony in contemporary Western societies can be usefully illuminated.[2] In the context of this study, these texts are used alongside relevant historical discourses to construct a solid conceptual framework through which to re-examine the rise of literary confessionalism in postwar America. In order to bring these critiques to bear upon Sexton's poetry, and to account for the strategies and evasions by which this poetry is characterized, it will first be necessary to outline the particular function of confession in the Cold War political climate, and to begin to unpick its complicated relationship to the fraught concept of 'truth'.

In Elaine Tyler May's *Homeward Bound* (1988), Andrew Ross's *No Respect* (1989), Stephen J. Whitfield's *The Culture of the Cold War* (1996), and Lori Bogle's *Cold War Culture and Society* (2001), 1950s America is viewed through the lens of collective anxieties

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[1] See Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality* (1976) (London: Penguin, 1990) I, p. 59. While Foucault here states that confession produces 'truth', he clarifies, as I do in my own analysis, that this terminology is misleading in its suggestion of a direct and unproblematic correspondence between language and objectivity.
[2] See Peter Brooks, *Troubling Confessions: Speaking Guilt in Law and Literature* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2000) and Deborah Nelson, *Pursuing Privacy in Cold War America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002).

about national identity, communist infiltration, and containment. More significantly, however, May, Whitfield, Ross, and Bogle each attempt to situate these anxieties specifically in relation to the Cold War rhetoric of 'Americanism' – a rhetoric in which the freedoms permitted by American democracy were pitched against the oppressive, collectivist policies of Soviet communism. Rooted in the core principles of 'political conservatism . . . competitive capitalism . . . nativistic nationalism, and religious orthodoxy',[3]Americanism gave rise to the myth of a coherent '*national* culture', and, in turn, to the illusion of newly emergent political consensus [emphasis in original].[4] Indeed, by the end of the 1950s cultural commentators including Raymond Aron, Edward Shils, Seymour Martin Lipset, and Daniel Bell were all speculating about an 'end of ideology', in which the 'older political ideas of the radical movement had become exhausted and no longer had the power to compel allegiance or passion among the intelligentsia'.[5] While the 'consensus culture' that seemed to be emerging in the 1950s has remained an important staple of Cold War histories, it tends to be interpreted, with hindsight, as an unstable product of McCarthyite politics and the government's public attempts to quash support for the radical left. It was in the context of this McCarthyism, after all, that confession rose to prominence as a rare, but seemingly reliable, indicator of an individual's personal politics. With the creation and expansion of HUAC in the 1950s, confession evolved into one of the state's most vital instruments in the onslaught against communist infiltration. Possessing 'unique subpoena powers', HUAC demanded that suspects confess to their political sympathies – both past and present – and, more problematically, to those of other citizens.[6] Implicitly, then, the confession was valorized as

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[3] Lori Bogle, *Cold War Culture and Society* (London: Routledge, 2001), p. 303.
[4] Andrew Ross, *No Respect: Intellectuals and Popular Culture* (London: Routledge, 1989), p. 43.
[5] Daniel Bell, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*, pp. 41-42. For contemporaneous analyses of the postwar culture of consensus see Raymond Aron, *The Opium of the Intellectuals* (1955) (Edison, New Jersey: Transaction Publishers, 2001), Edward Shils, 'Daydreams and Nightmares: Reflections and Criticism of Mass Culture', *Sewanee Review* 65 (Fall 1957), pp. 587-608, and Seymour Martin Lipset, 'The Sources of the Radical Right' (1955), *The Radical Right*, ed. by Daniel Bell (New York: Anchor Books, 1963), pp. 307-72.
[6] David Caute, *The Great Fear* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1978), p. 89.

an unproblematic articulation of 'private' – and in this case ideological – truths. As HUAC's incursions into the private lives of American citizens grew increasingly intrusive, the constitutional legitimacy of the committee's right to compel testimony came under official scrutiny; towards the end of the 1950s, confession – and the right to withhold confession – became the loci of a series of legal debates about privacy, autonomy, and the scope of the state's jurisdiction over the individual.[7] In *Pursuing Privacy in Cold War America*, Nelson argues that the flurry of legislative activity that took place around testimonial speech at the height of domestic anticommunism was reflective of a coterminous 'crisis in privacy', in which distinctions between the public and the personal were becoming increasingly untenable.[8] While the crisis in privacy that Nelson here telegraphs was precipitated to some extent by the Cold War climate of paranoia, it was also contingent upon the postwar popularization of psychoanalysis and the consequent endorsement of the confession as a means to self-knowledge and catharsis. In other words, the crisis in privacy was a result of simultaneous and competing calls for disclosure and privacy:

> At the same time that a 'right to silence' was being asserted against the coercion of confession, the nation was beginning to binge on the revelation of private life in popular and, slightly later, literary culture. The commercial culture of celebrity, not cold war anticommunism, was accused of fostering a particularly corrupt appetite for private revelation. . . . This shift toward self-disclosure presents the mirror side of the 'death of privacy' debate: pronounced anxieties about the emerging culture of confession. From the beginning of the debate over privacy, fears of intrusion were met by an equally potent distrust of the shifting boundaries of self-disclosure. This relaxing of social norms cannot be separated from the perceived fears that the state was surveying private behavior because . . . U.S. citizens would become indifferent to their own privacy, which was measured by their willingness to offer information about themselves to strangers.[9]

The anxieties about voluntary and coerced disclosure to which Nelson here draws attention were largely coextensive with the emergence of anxieties about 'mass society'. As Edward

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[7] See *Miranda v. Arizona*, 384 U.S., 436 (1966) and *Watkins v. U.S.*, 354 U.S., 178 (1957).
[8] Nelson, p. 29.
[9] Nelson, pp. 18-19.

Brunner explains in *Cold War Poetry*, '[n]o other crisis so thoroughly engaged intellectuals in the years immediately following World War II as the unprecedented growth of mass culture'.[10] This was, in part, a result of the fact that the discourse of mass society had particular links, in the Cold War imaginary, to 'un-American' modes of political organization.[11] The concept of the 'masses', after all, has its immediate roots in radical social theories that emerged out of nineteenth-century Europe and, more specifically, the critique of capitalism advanced by Karl Marx in *The Communist Manifesto* in 1848.[12] Responding to the rise of fascism in Italy and Germany throughout the 1930s and 40s, a number of writers, including Wilhelm Reich and a handful of European émigrés (many of whom were instrumental in disseminating the theories and philosophies that are now associated with the Frankfurt School), were inspired to mobilize the concepts of 'mass society' and 'mass culture' as tools for excavating, accounting for, and theorizing the dynamics of totalitarian societies. For Theodor Adorno – perhaps the most famous affiliate of the Frankfurt School – the rise of European fascism was best interpreted as the undesirable, if inevitable, outcome of post-Enlightenment attempts to rationalize and standardize society: mass culture, he argues, is governed by the same homogenizing and systematizing impulses that manage the machinations of fascistic regimes:

> [M]ass culture is an organized mania for connecting everything with everything else, a totality of public secrets. Everyone who is informed has his share in the secret, just as under National Socialism the privilege of esoteric blood-brotherhood was actually offered to everyone.[13]

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[10] Edward Brunner, *Cold War Poetry: The Social Text in the Fifties Poem* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2001), p. 1. See Robert von Hallberg, *American Poetry and Culture, 1945-1980* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1985), p. 194.

[11] See Ross, p. 42.

[12] In *The Communist Manifesto* Marx and Engels make repeated reference to the masses and, more specifically, 'the great mass of the proletariat' who will overthrow the capitalist system. See Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (1848), trans. by Samuel Moore (London: Penguin, 2002), p. 234.

[13] Theodor W. Adorno, 'The Schema of Mass Culture', *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*, ed. by J. M. Bernstein (London: Routledge, 2001), pp. 61-97 (p. 83).

Through the discourse of 'mass culture', Adorno was able to draw important parallels between the operations of totalitarian administrations and those of their liberal-democratic counterparts. Adorno's theory of mass culture, and the social theories of the Frankfurt School more generally, had particular implications for the United States – a capitalist society in which people were increasingly anxious about the level of control that new media technologies such as television and radio were exerting over individual taste and consciousness.[14] While intellectuals in the 1950s were concerned with the ways in which the popular media might transform 'national taste and sensibility', they were perhaps more concerned about the links between the rhetoric and reality of 'mass culture' – with its implied sublimation of individuality – and the collectivist ideologies of European fascism and Soviet communism.[15]

The problems presented by mass culture were the impetus for a three-part symposium entitled 'Our Country and Our Culture', which took place in 1952. Organized by, and published in, the *Partisan Review*, the symposium featured contributions from prominent Cold War thinkers including Irving Howe, David Riesman, Delmore Schwarz, and Norman Mailer. Over the course of the discussion, the panel considered the degree to which the postwar consensus regarding political democracy had impacted upon the choices and freedoms of the American citizen. For the historian and social critic Arthur Schlesinger, one of the symposium's leading contributors, mass culture – and what he supposed to be its inexorable homogenization of the national population – was something which could be countermanded solely through the reassertion of more 'American', individualistic, ideologies:

> The only answer to mass culture, of course, lies in the affirmation of America, not as a uniform society, but as a various and pluralistic society, made up of many groups with diverse interests. The immediate problem is to conserve cultural pluralism in the

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[14] See Theodor W. Adorno, 'Television and Patterns of Mass Culture', *Mass Culture*, ed. by Bernard Rosenberg and David M. White (Glencoe, Illinois: The Free Press, 1957), pp. 474-88.
[15] Hallberg, p. 194.

> fact of the threat of the mass media . . . and its policy of forcing the collective approach into the remotest corners of our intellectual life.[16]

For Brunner in *Cold War Poetry*, Paul Breslin in *The Psycho-Political Muse*, and Thomas Hill Schaub in *American Fiction in the Cold War*, the traits of individualism, diversity, and plurality that Schlesinger here Americanizes are clearly discernible in the literature of the 1950s and 60s. What literary mode, after all, encapsulates the diversity and plurality of society – as well as the diversity and plurality of the individual – as plainly as the first-person narrative? These traits are not, however, exclusive to this period; rather, as Sacvan Bercovitch argues in *The Puritan Origins of the American Self* (1975), the spirit of self-revelation is hardwired into the historical, political, and philosophical traditions of the United States. [17] It is this spirit that underpins the production of the 'countless' spiritual biographies, 'testimonies, declarations, relations', and confessional discourses that Bercovitch identifies at the heart of the American canon. As I explain more fully in later chapters, works such as J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951), Ralph Ellison's *The Invisible Man* (1952), Norman Mailer's *Advertisements for Myself* (1959), and Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* (1963) represent attempts to inscribe the 'outsider' experience into the national literature; they are, after all, narratives in which individual protagonists acknowledge, strain against, or outwardly reject, the relentless thrust of conformity and cultural expectation. For writers such as these, then, who rejected what Schaub terms the 'euphoric Americanism' that characterized certain strains of postwar culture, it was necessary to develop expressive strategies that 'both reflected their rupture with society and established at the same time a legitimate source of

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[16] Arthur Schlesinger Jr. qtd. in 'Our Country and Our Culture: A Symposium', ed. by William Phillips and Philip Rahv, *Partisan Review* 19.3 (May-June 1952), pp. 590-93 (p. 592). See also Ross, p. 55.

[17] Sacvan Bercovitch, *The Puritan Origins of the American Self* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975), p. 155. Nina Baym elaborates on the inextricability of self-revelation and the 'Puritan Experiment' in her introduction to the Early American Literature, 1620-1820 section of *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*, 5th edn. (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1998), I, pp. 153-61 (p. 154).

authority for describing a redefined "reality"'.[18] As Schaub proceeds to stress, this new and 'legitimate source of authority' was the individual subject:

> Within the postwar discourse of 'mass society', 'conformity', and 'totalitarianism', which governed thinking about society for writer and critic alike in the forties and fifties, the first person voice of the alienated hero developed a subversive aura. . . . [T]he first person appeared to be a form of resistance to general pressures, both popular and critical, for political conformity and controlled, crafted form. The discourse of resistance and reform was no longer dominated by the language of social and economic forces, giving way, instead, to explanatory models based in psychology – to a renewed focus upon the mind.[19]

While Schaub here identifies the 'subversive aura' of the first-person voice, other scholars, including Robert von Hallberg and Deborah Nelson, have interpreted the Cold War appetite for personal narratives as a conformist counter-response to repressive Soviet politics. 'While Soviet writers questioned the value of individualism', Nelson observes, American writers valorized it by 'latch[ing] onto the private self'.[20] Politically speaking, then, literary confessionalism is something of a paradox: it represents both a rejection of Cold War conformity and an affirmation of American individualism that could itself be interpreted as a conformist gesture. In this climate, the lyric poem, as a direct expression of personal 'thoughts and sentiments', came to function as both an illustration and affirmation of the individual's liberties under the capitalist-democratic regime – in spite of, or perhaps because of, the threat under which these liberties were placed during the Cold War.[21]

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[18] Thomas Hill Schaub, *American Fiction in the Cold War* (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), p. 68.
[19] Schaub, p. 69.
[20] Nelson, p. 32.
[21] See definition of 'lyric', *Oxford English Dictionary Online* <http://www.oed.com>. [Accessed November 25 2005].

2. Legacies, Lies, and the 'Awful Truth': Sexton's Critical Reception

In contemporary critical accounts of mid-century American literature, no poet is identified with the confessional genre as insistently as Anne Sexton. While her poetry is often situated alongside that of W. D. Snodgrass, Robert Lowell, and Sylvia Plath, it is Sexton who is most frequently cited as exemplifying – and even exceeding – the terms of paradigmatic confessional praxis. 'Of all the poets of this period', argues Peter Davison in his memoir of the Boston literary scene in the 1950s and 60s, 'Sexton alone can be described as pure "confessional": Plath transmuted her inner demons; Lowell turned his into fables; Snodgrass turned to other modes of poetry; but Anne lurched through her life from breakdown to breakdown, recovering herself and her talent by insisting on candor heaped upon candor, no matter how repetitive or trivial'.[22] According to Davison, Sexton – with her 'pure' brand of confessionalism – out-confesses even her most immediate and skilled contemporaries: Plath, Lowell, and Snodgrass. It is, it seems, only Sexton – or 'Anne', as Davison refers to her here – who confesses her 'inner demons' without processing them through any kind of creative filters. As this chapter makes clear, the attempt to isolate Sexton's writing from that of her peers is a recurrent manoeuvre within scholarly responses to confessional poetry, and one which critics typically tend to execute when seeking to valorize the work of Plath, Lowell, and Snodgrass at Sexton's expense. In the view of M. L. Rosenthal, for example, 'private' poetry should be navigated by a universalizing impulse that situates the 'public dimensions' of the suffering, but he goes on to suggest this is not the case in *all* confessional poetry. Interestingly, Rosenthal readily identifies these 'public dimensions' in the poetry of Robert Lowell and Sylvia Plath, drawing attention to the strands of 'cultural criticism' by which the

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[22] Peter Davison, *The Fading Smile: Poets in Boston from Robert Lowell to Sylvia Plath* (1994) (New York and London: W. W. Norton and Company, 1996), p. 153.

work of each poet is striated.[23] Despite his tendency to consolidate the creative praxes of Lowell, Plath and Sexton under the confessional descriptor, Rosenthal here distinguishes Sexton from her contemporaries by dismissing – or, more accurately, refusing to recognize – the public-political critique that runs through her poetry 'of madness'.[24] Rosenthal proceeds to evade the questions posed by this statement, claiming that he '[does] not wish to push this point any further – *poetry* is the issue' [emphasis in original].[25] Poetry is indeed the issue, but to drain Sexton's poetry of its public commitments entails a radical dislocation of political and aesthetic practice that necessarily distorts and limits the terms of that poetry.

For Laurence Lerner in 'What is Confessional Poetry?', '[n]o poet was more consistently and uniformly confessional than Anne Sexton',[26] while in the first and only monograph on confessional poetry, Robert Philips installs Sexton as 'the reigning high-priestess of the confessional school', suggesting that her 'nakedly autobiographical poems' enable the reader to 'reconstruct' the facts and details of 'her hellishly unhappy life'.[27] In Karl Malkoff's view, moreover, Sexton sits '*at the core of* what M. L. Rosenthal and others have named the Confessional school of poetry' [emphasis added].[28] Even Sexton, who at one time 'hated being called confessional and denied it', eventually seemed to accede to the label, but only on the condition that she be recognized as the sole exponent of confessional poetry: '*mea culpa*. Now I say I'm the *only* confessional poet' [emphasis in original].[29] In an interview with William Heyen and Al Poulin, Sexton goes on to explain the rationale behind this statement, and her relationship to literary confessionalism, more fully:

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[23] M. L. Rosenthal, 'Anne Sexton and Confessional Poetry' (1967), *Anne Sexton; Telling the Tale*, ed. by Steven E. Colburn (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1988), pp. 65-72 (pp. 67-68).
[24] Rosenthal, 'Anne Sexton and Confessional Poetry', p. 68.
[25] Rosenthal, 'Anne Sexton and Confessional Poetry', pp. 67-68.
[26] Laurence Lerner, 'What is Confessional Poetry?' *Critical Quarterly* 29.2 (Summer 1987), pp. 46-66 (p. 52).
[27] Robert Phillips, *The Confessional Poets* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1973), pp. 6; 73.
[28] Karl Malkoff, 'Anne Sexton', *Anne Sexton; Telling the Tale*, ed. by Steven E. Colburn (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1988), pp. 322-32 (p. 322).
[29] Anne Sexton, *A Self-Portrait in Letters*, ed. by Linda Gray Sexton and Lois Ames (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1991), p. 372.

> [F]or a while, perhaps even now, I was called a 'confessional poet'. And for quite a while I resented it. You know, I thought 'Why am I in this bag?' And then I kind of looked around and I thought 'Look, Anne, you're the only confessional poet around'. I mean I don't see anyone else quite doing this sort of thing. And then as years go by I get into new themes, etcetera, etcetera, and really don't think about what I am. You know, it shifts anyway. . . . [I]t's a difficult label, 'confessional', because I'll often confess to things that never happened. As I once said to someone, if I did all the things I confess to, there would be no time to write a poem. So, you know, I mean, I'll often assume the first person and it's someone else's story. It's just very amenable to me to kind of climb into that person and tell their story.[30]

Responding to Sexton's seeming acceptance of her status as a confessional poet, Jo Gill suggests that 'by proclaiming herself "the only confessional poet", Sexton simultaneously reinforces and denies the received relationship between her writing and confessionalism, contesting the boundaries of the mode as conventionally understood, and staking a claim for her own distinctive poetics – for a confessionalism *ne plus ultra*'.[31] Certainly, it is this double gesture of denial and reinforcement that characterizes much of Sexton's documented commentary on, and writing about, literary confessionalism.

The persistence of Sexton's ambivalence towards the confessional descriptor is nowhere more apparent than in the series of lectures she presented to a group of English majors in 1972 as the newly-appointed Crawshaw Chair at Colgate University, her husband's *alma mater*. The class she gave, entitled 'Anne on Anne', was, in fact, designed to acquaint students with the 'tricks' of her confessional poetry.[32] Interestingly, it was assessed by means of a written assignment in which students were required to write a fictitious interview with Sexton herself. As Sexton explained it, '[y]ou will bring questions to class each week and I will answer them. But not until you have already given your answer. In other words, you are to fabricate my reply and we will see how close you come as the term moves on'.[33] By inviting students to falsify her responses in this way, Sexton tacitly undermines the standard

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[30] William Heyen and Al Poulin, Interview with Anne Sexton (1976), *No Evil Star: Selected Essays, Interviews, and Prose*, ed. by Steven E. Colburn (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1985), pp. 130-57 (pp.133-34).
[31] Jo Gill, 'Anne Sexton and Confessional Poetics', *Review of English Studies* 55 (2004), pp. 425-45 (p. 426).
[32] Anne Sexton, Crawshaw Lectures (1) (1972), p. 1. HRHRC, Box 16, folder 5.
[33] Sexton, Crawshaw Lectures (1) (1972), p. 1: HRHRC, Box 16, folder 5.

valorization of truth over fiction: she is less interested in the ability of the class to predict her responses accurately than to conjure responses that are 'cohesive, integrated, thematic', and convincing.[34]

Throughout the Crawshaw lecture series, Sexton repeatedly identifies herself as 'a confessional poet who vomits up her past every ugly detail (sic) onto the page'.[35] At the same time, however, she reveals the intricacies of her poetic craft, and thus undermines other, more spontaneous characterizations of her creative practice. In this way, Sexton both encourages and refutes psychobiographical interpretations of her work. This strategy, which actively expresses Sexton's ambivalence about the scope of literary confessionalism, is writ large in her first lecture at Colgate, where she engages explicitly with the critical tendency to read the confessional poem as a transcript of personal, 'factual' data:

> As one critic said of my work, 'a volume of poems by Robert Lowell, or Anne Sexton or Sylvia Plath if these poems can be seen as a group, makes an unmistakably autobiographical impact'. This critic continues, 'Anne Sexton's poems, for example, create largely the world of her persona, the 'eye' of the poems which undergoes a continuing development and is clearly related intimately and painfully to the poet's autobiography'. . . . I would like for a moment to disagree. It is true that I am an autobiographical poet most of the time, or at least so I lead my readers to believe. However, many times I use the personal when I am applying a mask to my face somewhat like a young man applying the face of an aging clown. Picture me at my dressing table for a moment putting on the years. All those nights, all those cups of coffee, all those sneezes, all those shots of bourbon at 2 a.m., all those women waking with their morning faces after a night of love . . . all this applied like a rubber mask that the robber wears. *That* is what a persona is, that taking on of a voice, an ancient tradition, a clown show [emphasis in original].[36]

As Sexton makes evident in discussion with Heyen and Poulin, part of her ambivalence about the notion of confessionalism stems from her awareness that the impact of her poetry is bound up with her ability to convince her reader that the poem is, somehow, rooted in fact.

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[34] Sexton, Crawshaw Lectures (1) (1972), p. 1. HRHRC, Box 16, folder 5.
[35] Sexton, Crawshaw Lectures (9) (1972), p. 1. HRHRC, Box 16, folder 5.
[36] Sexton, Crawshaw Lectures (1) (1972), p. 1. HRHRC, Box 16, folder 5.

> I remember Ralph Mills talking about my dead brother whom I've written about. And I met Ralph and I said, 'Ralph', – this was a critical essay he'd written – 'Ralph, I had no brother, but then didn't we all have brothers who died in the war?' . . . But I write my brother, and of course he believes it. I mean, why not? Why shouldn't he? But I was just telling him incidentally, there was no brother. . . . I should say 'excuse me, folks, but no brother', but that would kind of ruin the poem.[37]

If the truth is likely to 'ruin the poem', then this is all the more reason to obscure the boundaries between what the confessional poet has really experienced and what is the product of his or her imagination. Again, then, the illusion of veracity – the ability of the poet to *convince* the reader that the poem is true – is far more essential to the success of the poem than 'truth' itself.

Rosenthal has, of course, made a key contribution to the recognition, analysis and criticism of confessional poetry. It was in his landmark review of Lowell's *Life Studies* in 1959 that the term 'confessional' was first ascribed to a cluster of American poets whose work he interpreted as trading explicitly, insistently, and unapologetically in the currency of the self. According to Rosenthal, this emerging mode of poetic discourse represented the 'culmination of the Romantic and modern tendency to place the literal Self more and more at the center of the poem'.[38] While Rosenthal is quick to locate confessional poetry – and its radical prioritization of subjective experience – in relation to earlier trends within Romanticism and modern literature, he is equally anxious to describe the way in which it departs from the lyric tradition. In Rosenthal's conceptualization, confessional poetry is so insistent in its focus on the self, and so resistant to conventional strategies of concealment, evasion, and symbolization, that it lacks the universal resonance achieved in works by William Wordsworth or John Keats; failing, ultimately, to sculpt 'psychological vulnerability

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[37] Heyen and Poulin, p. 136.
[38] M. L. Rosenthal, *The New Poets: American and British Poetry Since World War II* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 27. For further discussion of Rosenthal see Caroline King Barnard Hall, *Anne Sexton* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1989), p. 34.

and shame' into 'an embodiment of . . . civilization'.[39] 'We are now far', he states, 'from the great Romantics who . . . spoke directly of their emotions but did not give the game away even to themselves'.[40] Where, through recourse to 'cosmic equations and symbols', the Romantic poet 'lost his personal complaint in the music of universal forlornness', and his modern counterpart accessed the 'forbidden realm' of private discontent while shielding '[his] actual face and psyche from greedy eyes', the confessional poet is, by contrast, governed by the myopic desire to *remove* the mask under which he hides and 'make the speaker unequivocally himself' [emphasis added].[41] What Rosenthal here neglects to acknowledge, however, is that to discard one's 'mask' is less a gesture of revelation than an act of re-concealment. For reasons that I will discuss at length later, the notion of an absolute, 'unequivocal' self that Rosenthal here postulates significantly problematizes confessional poetry and the critical discourses that spin from it. Where Rosenthal envisions the self as a stable, consistent, *representable* being, confessional poetry, and much recent philosophical, psychoanalytic, and post-structuralist theory, has attempted to situate it as a product of discourse – something precarious, contradictory, and thoroughly resistant to linguistic signification. It is, nonetheless, this belief in an 'unequivocal', communicable selfhood that informs Rosenthal's characterization of confessional poetry as a poetry in which the poet and the poetic speaker are, for the most part, one and the same – a poetry, therefore, that is propelled by autobiographical impulse, by '*feeling*' over '*thought*' [emphasis in original].[42] Given Rosenthal's reasoning, and the fact he designates psychological 'breakdown' and 'paranoia' as confessional poetry's dominant themes, it is perhaps unsurprising that he should

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[39] Rosenthal, *The New Poets*, p. 79. See also Paul Lacey, 'The Sacrament of Confession', *Anne Sexton: Telling the Tale*, ed. by Steven E. Colburn (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1988), pp. 216-41.
[40] M. L. Rosenthal, *The Modern Poets: A Critical Introduction* (1960) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), p. 226.
[41] Rosenthal, *The Modern Poets*, p. 226.
[42] Rosenthal, *The Modern Poets*, p. 227.

identify the 'private suffering' of the poet as its 'ultimate referent' – a formulation in which the capacity of language to represent feeling goes unquestioned.[43]

Despite his influential role in defining 'confessional poetry', Rosenthal himself wondered, in later years, about the term's usefulness. In *The New Poets*, published in 1967, he acknowledged that as a descriptor 'confessional' was, and is, 'both helpful and too limited'. '[V]ery possibly', he continues, 'the conception of a confessional school has now done more damage than good'.[44]

While usefully describing the mechanisms of self-exposure that feature so prominently in mid-century American poetry, the 'confessional' epithet brings with it an etymological legacy that continues to impact – often negatively – upon the critical reception of first-person texts. In its conventional usage, after all, the verb 'confess' refers to the practice of personal disclosure – a practice that is inextricably invested in the revelation of the intimate, and potentially humiliating, details of lived experience. It is also tethered, through its privileged location within the legal, political, and religious ideologies of the West, to the notion of authenticity. As a result of its currency within contemporary societies, then, the widespread endorsement and appropriation of the confessional label has generated a situation in which the truth status of this type of poetry is always, inevitably, in question. After all, by implying the intimate proximity of lived experience to artistic practice the term not only makes assumptions regarding the circumstances of composition but also recommends, by extension, psychobiographical methods of interpretation.

It is this psychobiographical paradigm that serves as a model for Rosenthal's critical evaluation of confessionalism – and, specifically, the confessionalism of Lowell, Plath, and Sexton. Assessing the significance of Plath's career, Rosenthal accuses her of straying too far 'along the dangerous confessional way' by knotting her 'own predicaments' into the stuff of

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[43] Rosenthal, 'Anne Sexton and Confessional Poetry', p. 67.
[44] Rosenthal, *The New Poets*, p. 23.

her art 'until one was so involved in the other that no return was possible'.[45] Amongst other things, Rosenthal's statement demonstrates the automatic convergence of 'real life' and art that tends to take place under the confessional descriptor. Here, Plath's 'dangerous' confessional style is not only situated in relation to specific biographical co-ordinates – the 'facts of her life' – but it is also implicated in her personal demise; the demise, that is, from which 'no return was possible'. The erasure of aesthetic distance that here takes place – stimulated and sustained, in part, by Rosenthal's 'confessional' terminology – is similarly operable in his writing on Sexton, where he uses Sexton's proper name and the term 'speaker' interchangeably, welding together the poet and her various poetic personae into a single, symbiotic, subjective compound.[46] By unquestioningly identifying the 'real' person of the poet as the singular referent of the confessional 'I', Rosenthal blindly overlooks the fictionalizing strategies that Sexton and her contemporaries deploy in order to illuminate and interrogate the terms of their own 'confessional' praxes. As Lawrence Jay Dessner has remarked, after all; there is a dual tendency in Sexton's poetry to (falsely) identify itself as autobiographical, while parading 'overt signs, often traditional signs, of the presence of art, which is artifice, something other than truth-telling'.[47]

Despite its implicit flaws, Rosenthal's characterization of, and approach to, confessional poetry has exerted a strong influence over subsequent readings of Sexton's work. Most pertinently, it has given rise to questions which strike at the very heart of literature: What is poetry? By whom is it written? By what criteria can its worth be meaningfully assessed? These, and related concerns, are raised by Hayden Carruth in his review of *Live or Die* (1966), Sexton's third collection, in which he argues that the aesthetic merit of Sexton's poetry is 'impossible to judge' because it presents the reader with 'the

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[45] M. L. Rosenthal, 'Sylvia Plath and Confessional Poetry' (1967) *The Art of Sylvia Plath*, ed. by Charles Newman (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1970), pp. 69-76 (p. 71).
[46] See Rosenthal, 'Anne Sexton and Confessional Poetry'.
[47] Lawrence Jay Dessner, 'Anne Sexton's "The Abortion" and Confessional Poetry,' *Anne Sexton: Telling the Tale*, ed. by Steven E. Colburn (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1988), pp. 135-47 (p. 145).

never-solved problem of what literature really is, where you draw the line between art and documentary'.[48] For Carruth this line cuts awkwardly across the body of Sexton's writing, and as a result he struggles to find a critical language in which to discuss it: on the one hand he contends that her work is not 'merely documentary', that her poems 'are poems' rather than 'jottings or notes', and yet, in a seemingly contradictory manoeuvre, he characterizes these same poems in terms that are pointedly documentary. In his words, the collection is 'the *record* of four years of emotional illness', 'a heartbreaking *account*' of 'fear and despair and suicidal depression' that contains 'references too private for us to understand' [emphasis added]. Similarly, only a 'documentary' reading of the poems – a reading in which Sexton's life is reduced to the interminable cycle of depressive episodes, institutionalization, and therapy sessions that her poems set forth – could account for Carruth's surprise at the fact that Sexton had time 'to write any poetry at all'.[49] Whether intentionally or not, Sexton replicates the logic and rhetoric of Carruth's statement in her interview with Heyen and Poulin in 1973; in Sexton's hands, however, it is used to demonstrate the radical discontinuity of truth and confession: '[I]f I did all the things I confess to, there would be no time to write a poem'.[50]

Equally sceptical about the literary status of 'confessional' writing, Charles Gullans insists that Sexton's poems 'are not poems' but 'raw material', 'documents of modern psychiatry', 'literal confession'.[51] Yet again, then, confession is constructed as the crudest form of literary expression: it is both 'literal' – adherent, that is, to experiential 'fact', neither figurative nor metaphorical – and also 'raw', unprocessed by the creative machinery that we associate with the poetic craft. Complaining that he has been made a 'third party to [Sexton's]

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[48] Hayden Carruth, Review of *Live or Die* (1966), *Anne Sexton: The Artist and Her Critics*, ed. by J. D. McClatchy (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1978), pp. 130-31 (p. 130).
[49] Carruth, p. 130. Elsewhere, Sexton uses a similar logic as part of a counterassault against psychobiographical methods of interpretation: [I]t's a difficult label, "confessional", because I'll often confess to things that never happened. As I once said to someone, if I did all the things I confess to, there would be no time to write a poem. So, you know, I mean, I'll often assume the first person and it's someone else's story. It's just very amenable to me to kind of climb into that person and tell their story'. See Heyen and Poulin, pp. 133-34.
[50] Heyen and Poulin, pp. 133-34.
[51] Charles Gullans, Review of *Live or Die*, *Anne Sexton: The Artist and Her Critics*, ed. by J. D. McClatchy (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1978), pp.131-32 (pp. 131-32).

conversations with her psychiatrist', Gullans refuses to countenance the possibility that poems which deal in the 'private' subject matter of mental illness, domestic discontent, and sexual desire could be anything other than direct transcriptions of the poet's own thoughts, feelings, and experiences.[52] In accordance with this reductive logic, Gullans insists that reading Sexton's poetry as literature is 'simply silly', and contends, moreover, that its publication speaks volubly to 'the confusion of critical standards in the general mind'[53]. While short-sighted and naïve, such readings are by no means rare. A similar position to that of Gullans is adopted by Geoffrey Thurley in *The American Moment*, where the author rounds off his critique of Sexton's late poetry with the lament that she 'seems not to have succeeded in locating any centre of self' at all. For Thurley, Sexton's creative work is little more than a transparent, unambiguous statement about her own ontological stability, or lack thereof.[54] Such flawed logic is deeply inscribed in Thurley's account of Sexton: he goes on to speculate that Sexton would have 'nothing to offer if she were not "mad" or "depressed"'.[55] Although purporting to find her poetry 'honest on the human level', Thurley concludes that 'at the deep level of art' it is 'inauthentic, flat, one-dimensional'.[56] Within the space of this one sentence, then, Thurley identifies Sexton's work as both 'honest' and 'inauthentic', spotlighting – whether intentionally or otherwise – the contradictory impulses that are typically operational within critical responses to this type of writing.

As I have established in the previous paragraphs, there is an overwhelming tendency within existing academic scholarship to read confessional poetry as a disorderly textual emission – a spontaneous, reflexive, and uncontrolled regurgitation of subjective experience onto the sacred space of the page. In refusing to interrogate this assumption, many scholars

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[52] Gullans, p. 131.
[53] Gullans, pp. 131; 132.
[54] Geoffrey Thurley, *The American Moment: American Poetry in the Mid-Century* (London: Edward Arnold, 1977), p. 90.
[55] Thurley, p. 88.
[56] Thurley, p. 88.

have overlooked the extent to which confessional poetry is conscious and critical of its own technical strategies – critical, especially, of the capacity of language to signify the complexities and ambiguities of lived experience. Thomas P. McDonnell has interpreted Sexton's poetry as 'not only personal but . . . the autobiography of the psyche itself'.[57] Like Carruth, Gullans, and Thurley, McDonnell not only dissolves the distinction between poet and poetic personae, but also conditions his argument on an *a priori* assumption that the shifting constellations of cognitive, sensorial, and social experience of which human consciousness is comprised are expressible through the terms and structures of language. By configuring Sexton's poetry as an 'autobiography of the psyche', then, McDonnell not only articulates the capacity of autobiographical writing to register the (arguably) conclusive 'facts' of historically located, personal experience – which is itself challenged by Lacanian and Foucauldian theory[58] – but also to fix and record the elusive, intangible 'truths' of personal perception.[59] In its tacit negation of poetic strategy – and the factors of form, metrics, and metaphor in particular – this approach fails to acknowledge the inextricability of textual inscription from the processes of selection, translation, and (re)configuration by which it is preceded; processes, that is, which necessarily distort the contours of the fantasized 'original' experience.

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[57] Thomas P. McDonnell, Review of *Live or Die* (1966), *Anne Sexton: The Artist and Her Critics*, ed. by J. D. McClatchy (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1978), pp. 132-35 (p. 132).
[58] Foucault, pp. 82-83. See Brooks, p. 99.
[59] Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1988), p. 141.

3. The Psychic Striptease: Staging Confession

In *Troubling Confessions*, Peter Brooks defines contemporary American culture explicitly in relation to its reliance on 'confessional discourse and multifarious therapeutic practice,' remarking upon the 'high value [that] has come to be placed on speaking confessionally' in the latter half of the twentieth century.[60] This situation, he argues, 'has evolved into a generalized belief in the catharsis of confession, of the value of telling all, in public'.[61] Given the high currency of confessional discourses in contemporary cultures, it is perhaps no surprise that editors and publishers have tended to market the poetry of Plath and Sexton as personal revelation, forever positing misleading, if profitable, connections between the writing and biographical fact. In the case of Plath, these issues have been productively illuminated by Tracy Brain, whose study, *The Other Sylvia Plath*, provides an enlightening analysis of the ways in which Plath's image, or, more accurately, the Plath persona, has been used to market her poetry, short stories, and even her 1963 novel, *The Bell Jar*. In Brain's view, this marketing strategy, in its cynical attempt to capitalize on the Plath enigma, mistakenly intervenes in the reader's engagement with the fictional texts: '[t]he reader is not simply purchasing a novel or a book of poems; they are invited to buy an autobiography'.[62] While for Plath this has been a largely posthumous phenomenon, Sexton's collections of poetry have always featured photographic or artistic representations of their author. Such editorial strategies, used to enhance the implied authenticity of the poems, have – as is evident from the preceding chapter – exerted a significant impact over the critical reception of female confessional poetry. Until very recently, then, scholars have tended to neglect the knowing, performative dimensions of confessional poetry, as well as its broader engagements with literary history and postwar American culture. These engagements are, however, writ

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[60] Brooks, *Troubling Confessions*, p. 140.
[61] Brooks, *Troubling Confessions*, p. 140.
[62] Tracy Brain, *The Other Sylvia Plath* (London: Longman, 2001), p. 7.

large in a number of works by Sexton and Plath and are staged compellingly in one of Plath's best-known poems, 'Lady Lazarus' (1962), which Rosenthal singles out in *The New Poets* as a 'true [example] of "confessional" poetry'.[63] Written the year before her death, 'Lady Lazarus' describes the 'art' of dying. Predictably, then, the reading that Rosenthal proposes is, as Britzolakis has observed, 'underpinned by recourse to biography, which correlates the speaker's cultivation of [this art] with Plath's suicidal career'.[64] Disengaging the system of symbolic imagery that Plath develops in the poem from any stable, biographical set of co-ordinates, I would like to draw attention to the ways in which 'Lady Lazarus' weaves together critiques of confessional discursive strategies, commodity culture, and femininity under the potent, unifying iconography of Christian resurrection. More specifically, however, I would like to propose that Plath's creative staging of the female body functions within this paradigmatic confessional poem as a powerful metaphor for the confessional project, and in doing so it provides an appropriate context for new, non-biographical readings of Sexton's own work.[65]

The poem opens with the cryptic assertion 'I have done it again' – a statement that makes use of the structures of traditional confessional discourse, while denying the reader access to the confessional referent, the obscure 'it,' around which these structures are necessarily organized. It is only as the poem unfolds that the object of the speaker's confession becomes apparent. Identifying herself as '[a] sort of walking miracle,' she routinely reassures the reader that 'the sour breath / Will vanish in a day' and 'soon the flesh / The grave cave ate will be / At home on me'. Gesturing towards the speaker's intimate knowledge of resurrection, these statements mark out her intentional and practised

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[63] Rosenthal, *The New Poets*, p. 82.
[64] Britzolakis, p. 151.
[65] Rosenthal usefully situates 'Lady Lazarus' alongside Lowell's 'Skunk Hour' as a 'true [example] of confessional poetry'. See Rosenthal, *The New Poets*, p. 82.

involvement with death. Suicide, albeit failed, is what she has 'done . . . again', and this is the thing to which she is moved to confess.

If, as I have already argued, the practice of confession is a major point of reference in 'Lady Lazarus,' then its processes are most suggestively replicated in Plath's rendering of the speaker's figurative resurrection.

> The peanut-crunching crowd
> Shoves in to see
>
> Them unwrap me hand and foot –
> The big strip tease.
> Gentlemen, ladies
>
> These are my hands
> My knees.

Read metaphorically, then, these lines reconfigure confession as a form of psychic striptease, placing it firmly in the register of performance. In accordance with its legal-religious history, confession retains its ritualistic shape, though the terms of the ritual have changed. Here, confession is no longer part of a private exchange, and neither does it function within systems of truth, catharsis or even punishment. Rather, it exists purely as spectacle, re-packaged and re-staged for the media generation.

> Dying
> Is an art, like everything else.
> I do it exceptionally well.
>
> I do it so it feels like hell.
> I do it so it feels real.
> I guess you could say I've a call.
>
> It's easy enough to do it in a cell.
> It's easy enough to do it and stay put.
> It's the theatrical
>
> Comeback in broad day
> To the same place, the same face, the same brute
> Amused shout:

'A miracle!'
That knocks me out.
There is a charge

For the eyeing of my scars, there is a charge
For the hearing of my heart –
It really goes.

And there is a charge, a very large charge
For a word or a touch
Or a bit of blood

Or a piece of my hair or my clothes.

If dying and poetry are each in the index of art, 'like everything else', then questions regarding the authenticity of represented experience – be it packaged as confession or not – are rendered somewhat irrelevant. Employing artistic mechanisms that distort and mislead its audience, confession, like the speaker's carefully-orchestrated resurrection, is the product of a theatrical imagination, and never a pure representation of lived experience. Through the use of the first-person pronoun, Plath's confessional writing identifies itself (falsely) as autobiographical, while simultaneously – through its sophisticated metrical and rhythmic manoeuvres – advertising its status as art, and thus as artificial.

As the motifs of the suffering human body and the practice of confession are alike embedded within the traditions and rituals of Christianity, so they converge in 'Lady Lazarus' through Plath's suggestive deployment of religious symbols and rhetoric. Auctioning off corporeal relics – her hair, her clothes, a 'bit of blood' – alongside her confessional 'words,' the speaker aligns the exchange value of testimonial discourses to that of fleshly souvenirs. Both, it seems, lay claim to an authenticity that is socially and economically marketable, but which is, ultimately, unverifiable. The religious-confessional nexus that Plath addresses in 'Lady Lazarus' is not only referential and metaphorical, but is also, in my view, written into the poem at the level of structure and form. Through her use of tercets and anaphoric

repetition (as evidenced in the lines '*I do it* exceptionally well. / *I do it* so it feels like hell. / *I do it* so it feels real' '*the same* place, *the same* face, *the same* brute,' and specific phrasal constructions, such as 'there is a charge for...') Plath's poem seems to refer back to the tripartite model that Christian doctrine traditionally ascribes to the Holy Trinity – that is, the doctrine which holds that God is, simultaneously, a singular being and a communion of coeternal identities – the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit [emphasis added]. Given that the Trinity is officially classified as a 'divine mystery,' a 'truth whose essence . . . can be expressed by the finite mind only in terms of analogy', the Trinitarian architecture of 'Lady Lazarus' enhances the scope of Plath's interrogation of confession in its formal gestures towards the problem of knowing.[66] The Holy Trinity, after all, identifies an unbreachable distance between truth and representation that forecloses the possibility of divine understanding. While the speaker is able to 'confess', her confession is always situated as pure performance. She is always conscious of its status as theatre, as a commercial product that has been designed for the consumption of the 'peanut-crunching' masses. In the latter stages of the poem, the speaker identifies her market value as lying specifically and exclusively in the supposed authenticity of her confessional performance:

> I am your opus.
> I am your valuable,
> The pure gold baby
>
> That melts to a shriek.
> I turn and burn.
> Do not think I underestimate your great concern.
>
> Ash, ash –
> You poke and stir.
> Flesh, bone, there is nothing there –

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[66] See entry for 'Mystery' in *New Advent Catholic Encyclopaedia* <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/10662a.htm>. [Accessed June 13 2006].

Finally, then, the body of the speaker is theatrically decomposed – 'Flesh, bone, there is nothing there'. If this body has so far functioned as an objective correlative for referential truth, then its disintegration necessarily implies the erosion of language's truth-bearing potentiality and, by extension, the highly-contested notion of truth itself. Like the Holy Trinity, the confessional statement organizes itself around a promise of truth that it can never fulfil; the phenomena which it purports to describe are fundamentally irreconcilable to existing economies of knowledge and signification, and are destined to remain forever mysterious.

In 'Lady Lazarus,' then, confession becomes a mode of critique through which the snug alliance of truth and personal testimony can be performatively unsettled. We find an equally critical, self-reflexive, and nuanced approach to confession in Sexton's writing. In 'For Mr. Death Who Stands with His Door Open' from *The Death Notebooks* (1974), Sexton, like Plath, positions dying – as it is constructed in the confessional poem – firmly in the register of art. In this context, death is personified as an 'actor', a 'kind of Valentino', a man of 'many masks' who is key to her suicidal performances. As the poem progresses, the speaker describes dying as a 'puppet play', an entertainment, a scenario that she plays out, crucially, through figures *not herself*. Such metaphors work to foreground the fact that the confessional revelation – no matter how intimate, or how expressive it seems to be of the poet's 'true' state of mind – is always and already a performance. As such, it is heavily predicated on ritual – a fact that becomes especially apparent in the closing lines of the poem:

> But when it comes to my death let it be slow,
> let it be pantomime, this last peep show,
> so that I may squat at the edge trying on
> my black necessary trousseau.

Here, the death that the speaker longs for is both a 'pantomime' – a theatrical entertainment that is absurd, outrageous, and even comic in its various excesses – and the 'last peep show' – a slow striptease which takes place in front of an audience hungry for the illusion of intimate revelation. This illusion of revelation, the slow striptease, is offset by a ritualized act of concealment: the speaker imagines death explicitly as a 'trying on' of a morbid ceremonial garment, the black trousseau that is so 'necessary' to her deathly performance.

It is the ritual of the confessional performance that provides the structure for the early drafts of *Mercy Street* (previously entitled *The Cure* and *Tell Me Your Answer True*), the play that Sexton began writing in 1962 – a full seven years before its off-Broadway premiere in 1969. Although, in accordance with Sexton's wishes, the play has never been published, her typed transcripts of the numerous drafts are available for viewing at the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, where the entire archive is housed. While *Mercy Street*, like much of Sexton's poetry, explores the dynamics of dysfunctional familial relationships, the framing device that Sexton develops speaks specifically to her interest in the currency of confession in postwar America. As Sexton explained in an interview with Lois Ames, the first versions of the play turned on the central themes of 'Christ and madness':

> A girl who has committed suicide [Daisy] finds herself in death as a character in a circus sideshow looking for Christ. She is hounded by morality figures with names like Backbiter, Barker, Flesh, and Charity and when she turns from religion to psychiatry, she finds no Christ in that realm either.[67]

As is clear from the various drafts,[68] Sexton initially envisioned the play opening with a

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[67] Lois Ames, Interview with Anne Sexton (1969), *No Evil Star: Selected Essays, Interviews, and Prose*, ed. by Steven E. Colburn (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1985), pp. 119-29 (p. 121).

[68] The references which follow are taken from what appears to be the same late draft of *Tell Me Your Answer True*. This is, in fact, the draft in which Sexton amends the title of the play to '*Mercy Street*'. In order to reflect the chronological positioning of this draft in relation to earlier and subsequent versions, I refer to it as '*Tell Me Your Answer True / Mercy Street*' (an earlier draft of the play, dated 1964, is simply cited as '*Tell Me Your Answer True*'). While this version is divided into two distinct acts, Sexton scene demarcations are not clear. For this reason, the references below contain only details of the relevant act and the page number it is assigned within the draft (the latter of which was almost always typed in the upper right-hand corner of her manuscript).

'commercial', delivered in a 'side show' style by a ringmaster figure, or 'Manager', wearing 'a top hat and carrying [a] megaphone', through which he advertises the performance that is scheduled to ensue:

> Hurry. Hurry. Hurry. Ladies and gentlemen, step right up. The big show is about to begin. Get your tickets here. Get your seats. . . hurry, hurry, hurry. Ice cream, tonic, candy, peanuts, chewing gum, chocolate almonds. Hurry, hurry, hurry. See the painted lady. See the pickled dog. See the three-eyed psychiatrist. See the priest who drinks the brandy. See the universe in its underwear. See the fire that burns in the house of Daisy. Hurry, hurry, hurry . . . the big show, the first act is about to begin.[69]

As the Manager goes on to explain, the play is 'the play of the act of death': it is 'Daisy's life . . . written by a liar . . . done up for you by a poet'.[70] As in 'Lady Lazarus', then, death is an 'act', a performance, a fiction designed to entertain an audience who 'like to see people feel'.[71] In addition, the performance is expressly linked to the traditional rituals of religion and confession. In an increasingly secular world, the performance of emotion, couched within various gestures of exposure, has worked to eclipse the belief system of Christianity, as well as the role of confession within this system. As Daisy exclaims in one version of the play, '[t]hey have replaced Christ with some sort of SHOW!'[72] The 'show', in fact, is all that the afterlife comprises – the dead sit and 'view' the confessions of recent arrivals to the afterlife, and are, occasionally, forced to give witness statements about their own memories of the newly dead.

Having committed suicide, Daisy, the protagonist, finds herself in 'The Place', a purgatorial space in which she is compelled to provide testimony about her life – or, in the words of one of the morality figures, to 'tell it all, the worst of it all'.[73] The 'worst of it all', it transpires, is Daisy's repressed memory of her father's drunken sexual advances, which are

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[69] Anne Sexton, draft of *Tell Me Your Answer True / Mercy Street* (undated). Act 1, p. 1. HRHRC, Box 12, folder 2.
[70] Sexton, draft of *Tell Me Your Answer True / Mercy Street* (undated). Act 1, p. 2. HRHRC, Box 12, folder 2.
[71] Sexton, draft of *Tell Me Your Answer True* (1964). Act 2, p. 80. HRHRC, Box 13, folder 6.
[72] Sexton, draft of *Tell Me Your Answer True / Mercy Street* (undated). Act 2, p. 15. HRHRC, Box 12, folder 2.
[73] Sexton, draft of *Tell Me Your Answer True / Mercy Street* (undated). Act 2, p. 11. HRHRC, Box 12, folder 2.

observed by her great-aunt Amy, who subsequently turns mad. This episode, positioned as the principal motivating factor in Daisy's death, is re-enacted at the play's crescendo. Traumatic as the restaging of this incident is, it is quickly brushed aside to make way for the next 'show'. At the close of the final act, the Manager returns to centre stage to announce details of what is to follow: 'In just 12 minutes the next show will begin, an old lady from Old Crow, Yukon, is next in line. So come back soon. We're always here at THE PLACE – continuous entertainment 24 hours a day'.[74] The supposed sanctity of intimate revelation is thus unsettled; in this context, the intimate revelation is reformulated as a performance that is manufactured to fulfil mass society's need for 'continuous entertainment'.

These sentiments are echoed in poems written at various stages in Sexton's career. In 'The Play', from *The Awful Rowing Toward God* (1975), Sexton invokes theatrical metaphors in order to question the veracity of the confession and to stress the manufactured status of testimonial discourse in general.

> I am the only actor.
> It is difficult for one woman
> to act out a whole play.
> The play is my life,
> my solo act.
> My running after the hands
> and never catching up.
> (The hands are out of sight –
> that is, offstage.)

Here, the play of the speaker's life is not spontaneous or improvised, but is authored by hands that are 'offstage' and 'out of sight'. While this offstage activity is acknowledged, it is referenced inside parentheses, indicating the fact that it is subordinate to what happens onstage, to what is presented to the audience. As in *Mercy Street*, the 'show' of confession is prioritized over the truth value of the revelations that unfold in the course of the performance.

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[74] Sexton, draft of *Tell Me Your Answer True* (1964). Act 2, p. 83. HRHRC, Box 13, folder 6.

In 'The Play', this performance is carefully scripted; the speaker works within the dictates of certain stylized modes of expression, giving 'hundreds' of 'speeches', 'all prayers, all soliloquies'. Given that these modes of expression are formulaic, they suggest the potential of language to distort experience, and thus work to signal the inevitable disjunction between 'truth' and representation – a disjunction that is articulated more forcefully as the poem draws to a close: 'I am standing upright', the speaker states, 'but my shadow is crooked'.

In 'Said the Poet to the Analyst' from *To Bedlam and Part Way Back*, Sexton explores the potential of language to constrict and distort meaning through an unidirectional dialogue between the poet-speaker and the silent figure of the analyst. Within this framework, Sexton not only interrogates the veracity of confessional discourse, but also gestures towards its currency in contemporary American culture. Addressing the eponymous figure of the analyst, Sexton's poet, like the speaker of 'Lady Lazarus', formulates confession as a commodity. More pressingly, she worries that her ability to trade in this commodity is based on her capacity to deceive the analyst about the truth of what she is saying. Sexton thus likens the processes of confession to gambling, in which winning the jackpot – or successfully deceiving the reader-analyst – gives way to a significant degree of guilt:

> Your business is watching my words. But I
> admit nothing. I work with my best, for instance,
> when I can write my praise for a nickel machine,
> that one night in Nevada: telling how the magic jackpot
> came clacking three bells out, over the lucky screen.
> If you should say this is something it is not,
> then I grow weak, remembering how my hands felt funny
> and ridiculous and crowded with all
> the believing money.

Attentive to the fictional dimensions of her confessions, the speaker can only feel 'funny' and 'ridiculous' as her hands are crowded with the 'believing money' of the reader – the reader

who has made an emotional (and financial) investment in the poetry's purported rootedness in autobiographical fact.

Again, in 'Hurry Up Please It's Time' from *The Death Notebooks*, confession is not only configured as entertainment, but also, more explicitly, as commodity. Set against a backdrop of consumerism, mass society, nationalism, and the rise of minority politics, the poem foregrounds the anxieties that circulate around these interlocking phenomena. In addition, it works to situate the personal revelation as a counter-response to the perceived homogenization of postwar culture and the related rhetoric of Americanism. Like confession, patriotism has become another arm of American consumerism; it is no longer a free or authentic expression of national pride, but a hollow display through which one registers one's required allegiance to the American ideology: here, then, '[m]ilk is the American drink' and '[p]eanut butter is the American food' that 'we all eat . . . being patriotic'. Sexton's charismatic speaker rubs against the grain of this patriotic conformity, telegraphing her radical credentials through the title she ascribes to herself: 'Ms. Dog'. By the early 1970s, Sexton was becoming increasingly aware of the women's movement, and, according to Kumin, 'began to speak of herself as Ms. Dog'.[75] To Sexton, this choice of appellation represented an attempt to seize power as 'a kind of liberated female deity', who, as we shall see, is both sexually and financially autonomous.[76] As a title, 'Ms.' came to prominence in the late 1960s as a feminist corrective to the traditional designations of 'Miss' and 'Mrs.', which defined women solely through their relationships to men. 'Dog', of course, is an anagram of 'God', and in this context constitutes a playful attempt to invert the conventional order of gender and power. In the course of 'Hurry Up Please It's Time', Ms. Dog engages in repeated gestures of exposure, which she defends indignantly: 'Why shouldn't I pull down my pants / and moon at the executioner / as well as paste raisins on my breasts?', she asks.

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[75] Maxine Kumin, 'How It Was: Maxine Kumin on Anne Sexton', *Sexton: Selected Criticism*, ed. by Diana Hume George (Urbana and Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1988), pp. 197-210 (p. 207).
[76] Kumin, p. 207.

'Why shouldn't I pull down my pants', she continues, 'and show my little cunny to Tom / and Albert?'. As is the case in poems like 'The Operation', an early work to which I will return in subsequent chapters, the psychical exposure that takes place within the space of the confession is configured symbolically as an act of bodily exposure, in which the speaker displays her most private parts to an array of spectators. These displays are not only small rebellions, but are also the means by which the speaker makes her lucrative living:

> Ms. Dog is out fighting the dollars,
> rolling in a field of bucks.
> You've got it made if
> you take the wafer,
> take some wine,
> take some bucks,
> the green papery song of the office.
> //
> Who's at the podium
> in black and white,
> blurting into the mike?
> Ms. Dog.
> Is she spilling her guts?
> You bet.
> Otherwise they cough . . .
> The day is slipping away, why am I
> out there, what do they want?

The sacrament of confession is, of course, a pre-requisite for taking the Eucharist. Here, however, the speaker's confession does not only enable her to 'take the wafer' and 'take some wine', but also 'some bucks'. The spiritual thus collapses into the material, as confession is transformed from a means of achieving absolution into a means of making money. In addition, the confession is no longer a private exchange that takes place between a confessor and a confessant, but a public performance (incorporating a podium and a microphone) that is transmitted in 'black and white' to a mass audience. While Ms. Dog does recognize the demand for confession, 'spilling her guts' for all to see, she claims not to

understand the logic that underpins the public's appetite for intimate disclosure, asking 'why am I / out there, what do they want?'.

Like Plath's 'Lady Lazarus', 'For Mr. Death Who Stands with His Door Open', *Mercy Street*, 'The Play', 'Said the Poet to the Analyst', and 'Hurry Up Please It's Time' both interrogate and exploit the high currency of testimonial discourses in postwar America. By situating the confession as a performance and a commodity, Sexton usefully telegraphs its status as something that is not only staged, but also manufactured. In this way, she stresses its distance from autobiography and factual 'truth'. This distance is further reinforced by Sexton's deliberate utilization of strategies that reveal the constructedness of the confessional poem – strategies which I consider more closely in the next chapter.

4. Tricks, Truth, and Testimony

Most of the distancing, aestheticizing techniques that characterize Sexton's poetry are evident in even the earliest examples of her work. In a poem entitled 'An Obsessive Combination of Ontological Inscape, Trickery and Love' – the product of an exercise she began during the Snodgrass workshop at the Antioch Writers' Conference in 1958 – Sexton makes copious use of palindromes, homophones, anagrams, repetition, rhyme, half-rhyme, simile, and metaphor.[77] By ensuring that these linguistic tricks are clearly discernible at the surface of the text, Sexton forces the reader to recognize the confessional poem as a highly mediated, artful construction – anything but the unmitigated outpouring of personal emotion with which the genre is commonly identified. While 'An Obsessive Combination of Ontological Inscape, Trickery and Love' is not as pronouncedly 'confessional' as some of the poems in *To Bedlam and Part Way Back* or *All My Pretty Ones,* it is nonetheless engaged with issues that arise in the composition and dissemination of confessional poetry. In essence, then, this early poem sets out Sexton's (sceptical) approach to the relationship between poetry and truth, and, more specifically, asserts an understanding of art as artifice that is developed in her subsequent writing, and which serves as a premonitory invalidation of psychobiographical interpretations of her work.

> Busy, with an idea for a code, I write
> signals hurrying from left to right,
> or right to left, by obscure routes,
> for my own reasons; taking a word like 'writes'
> down tiers of tries until its secret rites
> make sense; or until, suddenly, RATS
> can amazingly and funnily become STAR
> and right to left that small star
> is mine, for my own liking, to stare
> its five lucky pins inside out, to store
> forever kindly, as if it were a star

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[77] This contextual information is provided in Diane Wood Middlebrook, *Anne Sexton: A Biography* (New York: Vintage, 1991), p. 124.

I touched and a miracle I really wrote.

While Middlebrook dismisses this short poem as an 'awkward little exercise', both Gill and Philip McGowan have argued convincingly for its relevance to discussions of Sexton's confessionalism.[78] For Gill, it is 'paradigmatic of Sexton's poetics in its determined and self-conscious exploration of its own linguistic and representational status'[79], while for McGowan it 'functions as a coda for a number of Sexton's works from the published collections' – the key that the reader requires in order to understand the scope of her poetic project.[80]

It is from Sexton's centrifugal, palindromic equation of 'rats' and 'star' that the entire poem spins. As Sexton explained to her students at Colgate in 1972, these nouns are part of the longer palindrome 'rats live on no evil star', which the American poet Conrad Aitken reportedly saw written on the side of a barn in Ireland.[81] Clearly, these words made a huge impression upon Sexton: 'it means something to me', she said in one of her lectures.

> My husband thinks it's crazy and has no meaning. But it means rats, the worst of us. Me, for instance, a rat, could live on a star that is not evil, could have a happy star. The evillest of creatures has a star, a place in heaven, and furthermore, it's a joke. . . . [M]aybe my feeling for 'rats live on no evil star', that strange unconscious excitement over words, is a pre-poem emotion. One can never know.[82]

If, as Sexton here suggests, 'rats live on no evil star' represents a 'pre-poetic' excitement about language, then it also implies that the confessional poem is only ever preceded by language, and thus that the poetic impulse is itself always and already textual. This concern with the anterior textualization of the subject-referent is similarly central to Sexton's contemporaneous poem, 'For John, Who Begs Me Not to Enquire Further', which I examine

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[78] Middlebrook, p. 124
[79] Jo Gill, 'Textual Confessions: Narcissism in Anne Sexton's Early Poetry', *Twentieth Century Literature* 50 (2004), pp. 59-87. (p. 66).
[80] Philip McGowan, *Anne Sexton and Middle Generation Poetry: The Geography of Grief* (Westport, Connecticut and London: Praeger, 2004), p. 5.
[81] Sexton, Crawshaw Lectures (9) (1972), p. 3. HRHRC, Box 16, folder 5.
[82] Sexton, Crawshaw Lectures (9) (1972), p. 3. HRHRC, Box 16, folder 5.

more closely later. As well as gesturing towards the radical interdependence of language and being, the twinned epithets of 'rats' and 'star' feature prominently in Sexton's personal mythology as the apotheosis of language's magical ability to convey ideas that fall beyond the reaches of the poet's conscious apprehension. In a letter to Dr. Orne, she describes the effects of the palindrome upon her imagination in the following terms:

> If I write RATS and discover that rats reads STAR backwards, and amazingly STAR is wonderful and good because I found it in rats, then is star untrue? . . . Of course, I KNOW that words are just a counting game, I know this until the words start to arrange themselves and write something better than *I* would ever know. . . . I don't really believe the poem, but the name is surely mine so I must belong to the poem. So I must be real.... When you say 'words mean nothing' then it means that the real me is nothing. All I am is the trick of the words writing themselves.[83]

In the first instance, then, Sexton's rats-star palindrome serves to focalize language's status as a 'game' or 'trick'. Like any 'counting game', however, language is governed by certain rules. While the poet, working within these dictates, is destined to encounter the expressive limitations of language – limitations that might circumscribe the poem's ability to reproduce reality, to furnish the poet with a poem that he or she might 'really believe' – the textual reality of the poem itself guarantees, to some extent, the ontological viability of the poet-subject: if the poem is 'real', then it follows that the same must be true of the poet by whom it was written. What Sexton alights upon in the rats-star dyad, then, is not only the inextricability of language and identity, but also, by extension, the irrevocable detachment of the conscious self of the poet from the specific identities that are constructed within the 'game' of poetic language.

As the title suggests, 'An Obsessive Combination of Ontological Inscape, Trickery and Love' represents an attempt by Sexton to examine the vexed intersections of language, truth, and identity, which are, for Sexton, exemplified by the rats-star palindrome. In many

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[83] Middlebrook, p. 82.

ways, the themes of the poem – and particularly Sexton's staging of language as a site of crisis – are oddly contemporary; her line of enquiry is contingent upon a logic that has come to be associated, in recent times, with discourses of the postmodern. While I am not interested in claiming Sexton as a postmodernist writer, I am intrigued by the ways in which the postmodern's foregrounding of limits – both the limits of 'subjectivity, sexual identity . . . systematization and uniformization'[84] and the notion of 'writing-as-experience-of-limits'[85] – might help to illuminate Sexton's construction of the vexed relationship between language and 'truth'. Certainly, 'An Obsessive Combination of Ontological Inscape, Trickery and Love' seems to be eminently demonstrative of what Linda Hutcheon has called a 'self-conscious turning toward the form of the act of writing itself'; that is, it foregrounds the procedures of textual production in a way that theorists, including Hutcheon, have cited as being typically postmodern.[86]

The textual self-reflexivity of 'An Obsessive Combination of Ontological Inscape, Trickery and Love' is crystallized in the terms of its title, which maps Sexton's concerns with questions of being, deception, and devotion as they relate to the individual's use of poetic language. It can also be read as a pre-emptive strike against glib, psychobiographical critiques of poetic confessionalism. As Gill explains, while 'the adjective "obsessive" seems to lay itself open to typical accusations of confessional compulsion and self-absorption' it soon 'transpires that the obsession is not with the self but with writing'.[87] More than anything, the obsession of the title is part of an attempt to order, balance, or 'combine' the various elements that weigh upon, intervene in, or problematize, the act of poetic creation. The elements of 'An Obsessive Combination of Ontological Inscape, Trickery and Love', then, are ordered and re-ordered to the point to compulsion – to the point, therefore, where

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[84] Hutcheon, p. 8.
[85] Julia Kristeva, 'Postmodernism?', *Romanticism, Modernism, Postmodernism* (London: Associated University Press, 1980), pp. 136-41 (p. 137).
[86] Hutcheon, p. 128.
[87] Gill, 'Textual Confessions', p. 67.

the poem is less a product of any personal experience than an attempt to achieve a perfect textual equilibrium. The word *combination*, moreover, gestures towards union, and to the coalescence both of textual elements and, more importantly, of speaker and reader.[88] With its relational implications, 'combination' might also be coupled to the final, and seemingly incongruous, term of the title: 'love'. In McGowan's words, 'love rises as a key term in the understanding of an individual's relation with her fellow human beings. . . . [It] allows and establishes our connection with the other, with third parties, with subjects wholly separate from ourselves'.[89] While 'love' does carry these connective associations, McGowan's characterization neglects to account for the more specific function that its invocation performs within the terms of the title – namely in countervailing the negative connotations of the preceding signifier, 'trickery'. Book-ended by 'ontological inscape' and 'love', 'trickery' is installed, quite literally, at the heart of poetic praxis. 'Trickery' thus comes to describe *what language does* in the poem, not to mention what it does in the real world. As the concepts of obsession, amalgamation, 'ontological inscape' and love work to telegraph the impasse that separates the confessional poem from the stuff of autobiographical 'truth' (thus casting doubt upon its assumed status as an uncontrolled, solipsistic outpouring of emotion), so 'trickery' serves to imply the ineluctably deceptive character of all discourse – even that which purports to be confessional. If, however, writing poetry is conditioned on the poet's tactical use of deceptive stratagems, evasions, and fabrications, then the word 'love' suggests that these stratagems are not deployed with any malevolent intent. Rather, the 'trickery' in the poem proceeds from language's inherent limitations; if one cannot convey truth through language, then whatever one says could be understood as a lie or a 'trick'. Even so, the very

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[88] According to Gill, the word *combination* 'has considerable resonance in the context of Sexton's poetics, signifying the combination or meeting of minds, the discursive relationship between speaker and reader required for the confession successfully to be created and disseminated'. For further discussion of Sexton's use of this term, see Gill, 'Textual Confessions', p. 67.

[89] McGowan, p. 8.

act of situating oneself in language, of attempting to communicate one's experiences or thoughts to other human beings is, at bottom, an act of love, an attempt to reach out to others.

Finally, the striking of distance between the confessional enunciation and the 'factual' specificities of personal autobiography which the poem aims to inscribe is accomplished through Sexton's reference to 'ontological inscape'. Through the use of this phrase, Sexton extends the scope of the poem's reference out beyond the self in two distinct directions. Firstly, the deliberate, emphatic use of the term 'ontological' situates the poem as an act of metaphysical enquiry: the poem is not concerned purely with the particulars of individual experience, but with its broader philosophical implications. In other words, 'ontological' implies an abstracting shift in focus from the individual to the universal. Secondly, the presence of 'inscape' in the title, a term coined by the British Victorian poet Gerard Manley Hopkins, serves to locate Sexton's writing in a longstanding tradition of poetic revelation. While 'inscape' is a slightly ambiguous concept, it has been variously defined by recent scholars as designating 'the unified complex of characteristics that give each thing its uniqueness and differentiate it from other things'[90], or, more straightforwardly, as 'the individual or essential quality of a thing'.[91] Inscape might also, however, mitigate the universalizing thrust of 'ontological', tending to present things in specific, rather than general, terms. Through 'ontological inscape', then, the poem becomes a site at which tensions between the individual and the universal are rendered manifest.

From the poem's commencement proper, the speaker's 'idea for a code' is inextricable from the processes of linguistic figuration and, more specifically, the act of writing. While the syntactical organization of the opening line implies that the '*idea* for a code' precedes the process of its own textual inscription – which is designated in this first line by the phrase 'I write' – the idea is, in fact, always and already preceded by language

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[90] See definition of 'inscape' in *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*, ed. by Chris Baldick

[91] See definition of 'inscape' in the *Oxford English Dictionary Online* <http://www.oed.com>. [Accessed December 28 2006].

[emphasis added]. In other words, any 'idea for a code', or, for that matter, any idea at all, is only made possible (and communicable) by the pre-existence of another code: that of language. This radical contingency of ideas and words is also, however, enacted in the course of the poem. By opening the first line with the adjective 'Busy' and breaking it, crucially, on the present tense clause 'I write', Sexton establishes a current setting for the poem in which being 'busy' with the 'idea for a code' means being actively engaged in language and, in this case, in the act of composing the poem that unfolds before the reader's eyes.

As Sexton positions language as the system that facilitates the speaker's 'idea for a code', she is also anxious to call attention to the structural and organizational principles which govern that system; what she might refer to as the 'rules' of the language game. In other words, Sexton not only seeks to examine the process of linguistic systematization, but also the limitations it imposes on all species of articulation: her utilization of commas, semi-colons, quotation marks, and capitalization disrupts the fluency and readability of the poetic text and, by extension, draws attention to the schematic dimensions of language and its consequent inability to convey the truth of human experience. This is demonstrated with some clarity in the opening line, in which the appositive phrase 'an idea for a code' intrudes upon the surface fluency of the sequence. Significantly, Edward P. J. Corbett and Robert J. Connors have argued that 'there is something *artful* about the appositive' [emphasis in original]. While it 'does not disturb the natural flow of the sentence as violently as parenthetical expressions do . . . it does interrupt the flow of the sentence, interrupts the flow to supply some gratuitous information or explanation'.[92] Utilizing appositives repeatedly in 'An Obsessive Combination of Ontological Inscape, Trickery and Love', Sexton gestures towards the necessary 'artfulness' of poetic language – an artfulness that makes it an unlikely site for the disclosure of any 'true' confession.

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[92] Edward P. J. Corbett and Robert J. Connors, *Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 386.

Perhaps the major presence within 'An Obsessive Combination of Ontological Inscape, Trickery, and Love', is that of the poet's organizing consciousness, which Sexton does everything in her power to accentuate. While this is accomplished in the most basic sense through Sexton's introduction of a subject, an 'I' who writes, it is also discernible in the careful design of the poem. As Middlebrook contends in her brief description of this short poem, words which are 'chosen for one kind of likeness (sound)' display 'other kinds [of likeness] once set in place'.[93] Although Middlebrook's assertion does speak to the processes of conscious selection that underwrite poetic composition, it implies, at the same time, that the 'other' non-phonic kinds of likeness which circulate within the poem are products of pure coincidence, accidents of similarity that Sexton did not engineer. In this way, it runs the risk of underestimating the extent to which the poem has been constructed, and the level of control that the poet exerts over every aspect of the compositional process. The entire structure of the poem rests, fittingly, on the bedrock of the words 'write' and 'writes', which, along with their homophonic counterparts 'right' and 'rites', thread through the first eight of the poem's twelve lines. By means of these homophones, Sexton foregrounds the capacity of words to convey multiple, divergent meanings, and thus situates language as a site of potential ambiguity and confusion. The repetition of 'write' and 'writes', along with the homophones 'right' and 'rites', works, then, to illuminate the detachability of sound and meaning, and to identify the inherent arbitrariness of the linguistic 'code'. Along with the poem's half-rhymes (which are found in 'routes'/'writes' and 'stare'/'store') these repetitions also generate an atmosphere that is best described as claustrophobic. As the reader encounters the same sound over and over again, he or she is steered towards an acknowledgement of the limited nature of language, and, by extension, a realization that the poet is always working with a finite lexicon of terms, and within the strictures of a grammar that is both restrictive

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[93] Middlebrook, p. 124.

and prescriptive. The anagram provides yet another locus for these considerations, though this time one that is visual rather than audible. As a word that is produced through the re-arrangement of the letters in another word, moreover, the anagram is itself highly suggestive of language's status as a code. When the speaker refers to taking 'a word like "writes" / down tiers of tries until its secret rites / make sense', 'writes' becomes an alphabet in microcosm; it is out of the characters which comprise it that all the nouns in the subsequent sequence – namely 'tiers', 'tries' (which Sexton here converts into a noun) and 'rites' – are constructed. In this way, Sexton generates a pattern of visual repetition to match the poem's pattern of rhyme, and in doing so she again demarcates the boundaries of the symbolic order.

For the speaker, then, the 'miracle' of poetry, as she refers to it in the closing line, does not lie in its ability to convey truth, but in its ability to construct its own truth. It is through the 'obsessive combination' of words and letters, after all, that this internal truth, coherence – or, as it is described by the speaker, 'sense' – is generated. Each word must, like the example of 'writes' that the speaker advances, be taken 'down tiers of tries until its secret rites / make sense': the poet, that is, must excavate and re-arrange the words she has at her disposal until they spell (or sound) out a new, seemingly mystical, meaning. In this way, 'An Obsessive Combination of Ontological Inscape, Trickery and Love' is very much about the capacity of the poem to transform language and meaning through its 'obsessive' processes: it is in the poem, after all, that 'RATS / can amazingly and funnily become STAR'. While the compulsive mechanisms of poetry are identified with the figure of the poet, however, they are also shown to be operational in the act of witnessing when, in the final lines of the poem, the speaker 'stare[s]' the 'five lucky pins' of an imaginary star 'inside out'. Here, it is the act of contemplation, not the act of writing, which engenders the inversion of the star. In this way, Sexton implies that the object of a poem is transformed before it even makes it to the page;

she suggests, therefore, that any truth claims made on behalf of the poem are, always and already, wholly spurious.

The relational function of confession that Sexton signals towards in 'An Obsessive Combination of Ontological Inscape, Trickery and Love' is developed more lucidly in another early poem, 'For John, Who Begs Me Not to Enquire Further', which she addressed to the poet John Holmes. As I mentioned earlier, Holmes had led a course of poetry classes at the Boston Adult Center, which Sexton started attending in 1957, a little after she first began writing under the advice of Dr. Orne. It was under Holmes's tutelage, and inspired by his technical expertise, that Sexton began experimenting with complex poetic forms, such as double acrostics, and using the types of wordplay that are so conspicuously at work in 'An Obsessive Combination of Ontological Inscape Trickery and Love'.[94] Out of this 1957 class there evolved another, smaller workshop comprising Sexton, Maxine Kumin, Sam Albert, George Starbuck, and Holmes himself, and it was in this more rarefied atmosphere that Sexton developed many of the poems which would feature in *To Bedlam and Part Way Back.* Recalling these early workshop experiences in an interview with Elaine Showalter, Sexton makes repeated reference to the tensions that beset her relationship with Holmes, noting that he 'didn't approve of a thing about me. He hated my poetry. . . . [He] found me evil'.[95] Certainly, Sexton's flamboyant style and uninhibited personality seem to have antagonized Holmes's reserved New England sensibility to the extent that he was moved to warn Kumin, his young protégé, to 'stay away from her'.[96] In Kumin's view, Holmes's discomfort around Sexton was due in no small part to the fact that his first wife had suffered from mental illness and had killed herself in his study many years earlier. Kumin speculated that Sexton's free discussion of her own psychological problems, combined with her determined and sustained

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[94] See Middlebrook, p. 98.
[95] Elaine Showalter and Carol Smith, Interview with Anne Sexton and Maxine Kumin (1976), *No Evil Star: Selected Essays, Interviews, and Prose*, ed. by Steven E. Colburn (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1985), pp. 158-79 (pp. 163-164).
[96] Showalter and Smith, p. 165.

aestheticization of manic depressive behaviours in her poetry, provided Holmes with an unwelcome reminder of this past trauma.[97]

From his first encounters with Sexton and her poetry, Holmes was concerned that her subject matter was too private: 'He kept saying, no no, too personal, or you mustn't, or anything. Everything he said about my poems was bad, almost altogether'.[98] Holmes's objections to Sexton's poetry, like those of so many subsequent readers, were rooted for the most part in his queasiness about their 'personal' content: madness, he told her, 'wasn't a fit subject for poetry'.[99] While Sexton committed the double sin of using the confessional mode and dealing with 'private' subject matter, however, this content was not straightforwardly coextensive with the 'facts of her life', and certainly not in the way that Holmes implied.[100] Even at her most 'confessional', Sexton is at some level confessing the impossibility of producing a 'true' confession; her poems are just as engaged with the problems of mediating content as the content itself. As is suggested by his concerns about Sexton's subject matter, Holmes petitioned for the installation of a *cordon sanitaire* around the space of the 'too personal'; he sought to maintain the distinction between public and private – a distinction which was becoming increasingly untenable in other parts of American culture – within the bounded space of the lyric poem. Similarly, his related fear that Sexton's poetry simply generates a 'spectacle of someone experiencing release' seems to have been fuelled by contemporaneous political anxieties about the containment of subversive influences in the wake of the Second World War – anxieties which are explored more fully in the concluding chapter of this thesis.

The commentary that Holmes wrote in response to Sexton's proposed manuscript for *To Bedlam and Part Way Back* foregrounds the strength of his reaction to Sexton's writing.

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[97] See Showalter and Smith, p. 164.
[98] Showalter and Smith, pp. 164-65.
[99] Sexton, Crawshaw Lectures (9) (1972), p. 2. HRHRC, Box 16, folder 5.
[100] Again, this term is appropriated from Ted Hughes's writing on the Plath estate. See Ted Hughes, 'Sylvia Plath: the facts of her life and the desecration of her grave', *The Independent*, 20 April 1989.

After speculating that publishers would be wary of the title, Holmes provided Sexton with a précis of his reservations about her project:

> I distrust the very source and subject of a great many of your poems, namely, all those that describe and dwell on your time in the hospital. . . . It bothers me that you use the poetry in this way. It's all a release for you, but what is it for anyone else except a spectacle of someone experiencing release? . . . Don't publish it in a book. You'll certainly outgrow it, and become another person, then this record will haunt and hurt you. It will even haunt and hurt your children, years from now.[101]

This commentary, though harsh, prompted Sexton to consider the nature of her poetic project, and to engage more pragmatically with its potential implications and usefulness. Sexton drafted an epistolary answer to Holmes's criticism but quickly decided to inscribe her feelings in a poem instead: 'I could have written you the volumes that raced defensively through my mind, for two days now. Instead a poem; the condensation of it all: I let one word speak for many'.[102] While Holmes's critique is clearly situated as the catalyst for the poem, Sexton is quick to establish that 'For John, Who Begs Me Not to Enquire Further' is not an uncontrolled eruption of emotion; she strikes an immediate distance between the 'volumes that raced defensively through [her] mind'– the 'feelings', perhaps, to which I have already referred – and the poem which finally ensues, 'the condensation of it all'. By telegraphing the processes of selection and 'condensation' that are essential to any act of poetic creation, Sexton foregrounds the strategies that separate emotional 'release' from poetry, and graciously rebukes Holmes's attempt to characterize her work as an unmediated flood of feeling. Furthermore, by rooting her poetry in the principle of the 'one' speaking for the 'many' Sexton not only foregrounds the universalizing movement of the poem but also echoes the words of Whitman's speaker in *Song of Myself*, and thus locates her writing firmly

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[101] John Holmes, Letter to Anne Sexton (February 8 1959). HRHRC, Box 20, folder 6.
[102] Sexton, *A Self-Portrait in Letters*, p. 59.

within the American literary tradition.[103]

The title of 'For John, Who Begs Me Not to Enquire Further' paraphrases the nineteenth-century German philosopher Schopenhauer in a letter to Goethe in which he stresses the value of the individual's sustained pursuit of 'appalling' knowledge. In Schopenhauer's words,

> It is in the courage to make a clean breast of it in face (sic) of every question that makes the philosopher. He must be like Sophocles's Oedipus, who, seeking enlightenment concerning his terrible fate, pursues his indefatigable enquiry, even when he divines that appalling horror awaits him in the answer. But most of us carry in our heart the Jocasta who begs Oedipus for God's sake not to inquire further.[104]

This same quotation later became the epigraph for *To Bedlam and Part Way Back*, in which 'For John' features in a special section alongside 'The Double Image' and 'The Division of Parts' – the poems that Sexton regarded as the most 'confessional' of her early works.[105] In the title of 'For John', then, Sexton places the confessional speaker in the role of the insistent and inquisitive Oedipus, who doggedly pursues 'enlightenment' in his quest to uncover the truth of his biological origins. At the same time, she casts the eponymous John as Jocasta, the mother of Oedipus, for whom knowledge is fatal: Jocasta kills herself on discovering she has committed incest with the son who murdered her husband, his father, Laius. While this reference to classical mythology designates the divergent positions of the speaker and the addressee of 'For John', it also constitutes an attempt by Sexton to locate her particular brand of confessionalism in relation to psychoanalysis – namely, by way of an indirect reference to Freud's Oedipus complex. As Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis argue in *The Language of Psycho-Analysis*, the Oedipus complex is 'the major axis of reference for

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[103] See Walt Whitman, *Song of Myself, Leaves of Grass* (1855), ed. by Malcolm Cowley (London: Penguin, 1986).

[104] This quotation, appropriated from a letter written to Goethe by Schopenhauer in the November of 1815 is reproduced in Sexton's epigraph for *To Bedlam and Part Way Back* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1960). Unpaginated.

[105] Middlebrook, p. 101.

psychopathology' and 'plays a fundamental part in the structuring of the personality, and in the orientation of human desire'.[106] Sexton's coded reference to the Sophoclean myth in the title of 'For John', therefore, not only works to reveal the precise nature of the speaker's attitude to the confessional project but also foregrounds the connections between this project and psychoanalytic practice, the 'talking cure' that relies upon the testimony of the analysand and his or her desire to unearth knowledge which would otherwise remain concealed in the dark recesses of the unconscious.

Despite the eagerness of most Sexton scholars to establish 'For John' as a more or less straightforward response to Holmes's criticism, I would like to contend, with Gill, that 'its importance lies not in its defense of what confession reveals, but in its exemplification of how it functions'.[107] Like many of Sexton's subsequent poems, then, 'For John' engages with the problematic truth status of what would later become known as 'confessional poetry' through an exploration of the processes and strategies by which this poetry – like all poetry – is produced. While I am interested in the poem's system of reflective imagery, and its putative status as a 'narcissistic narrative' – in which 'to tell us about telling the truth, the speaker must weave a "complicated lie" which may itself be a lie'[108] – I am just as intrigued by the poem's related positioning of the self as a textual construction, and the ways in which this notional 'textual self' might enhance understandings of Sexton's confessionalism.

While it stands to reason that the self, as it is posited in the poem, must be constructed textually, Sexton implies in 'For John' that it is also textualized *prior* to its poetic signification. This is indicated to some extent in the terms of the title, where the relationship between the addressee, 'John', and the speaker, 'Me', is formulated through explicit reference

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[106] Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis, *The Language of Psycho-Analysis*, trans. by Donald Nicholson-Smith (London: Hogarth Press, 1973), p. 283.
[107] Gill, 'Textual Confessions', p. 73.
[108] Gill, 'Textual Confessions', p. 74.

to another foundational cultural text: the myth of Jocasta and Oedipus. As the poem gets underway, Sexton continues to draw these connections between subjectivity and textuality:

> Not that it was beautiful,
> but that, in the end, there was
> a certain sense of order there;
> something worth learning
> in that narrow diary of my mind,
> in the commonplaces of the asylum
> where the cracked mirror
> or my own selfish death
> outstared me.

Here, the speaker's mind is a 'narrow diary', which may or may not yield 'something worth learning'. While the diary – a textual record of thoughts and experiences that are, to some extent, private – might, for some critics, share certain characteristics with the confessional poem, it is to the speaker's mind, and not the poem, that this metaphor is applied. What Sexton implies, then, is that the mind is textualized *in advance* of any attempt to communicate, not to mention poeticize, its contents. Further, if the self – even the private self – is always and already encoded in the terms of language, then the notion of confession as an unmitigated outpouring of emotion is cast into serious doubt. Sexton thus describes a scenario similar to that which Brooks imagines in 'The Future of Confession' – a scenario in which one's sense of inwardness is generated by 'the imperative of confession', where the self is 'the product of the search to know what there is to confess'.[109]

The constructedness of the poetic confession is further flagged, in the lines which couch the diary metaphor, by Sexton's use of anaphora. Through this rhetorical figure of repetition (the 'in' at the beginning of the lines) Sexton works to stress the connections between 'that narrow diary of my mind' and 'the commonplaces of the asylum'. While the diary contains the private thoughts of the individual, the commonplace – from the Latin *locus*

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[109] Peter Brooks, 'The Future of Confession', *Law, Culture and the Humanities* 1.1 (2005), pp. 53-74 (p. 70).

communis, meaning a theme or argument 'of general application' – is a selection of information that is transcribed and compiled by an individual but which tends to be of broader interest.[110] As Karin Wulf notes, the commonplace book, like the diary and the letter, has a long and particular association with domesticity and, necessarily, with the tradition of women's writing.[111] It is 'in' these texts of the self – the diary and the commonplace – that the speaker is 'outstared' by 'the cracked mirror' / or [her] own selfish death'. Sexton thus anthropomorphizes the inanimate object of the mirror, not to mention the concept of death, with much the same subtlety that she attempts to textualize subjectivity. More importantly, however, the mirror and her projected death not only stare back at the speaker but actually *out*stare her. Given that each of these things – the mirror-image and the death – exist *within* the 'narrow diary' of the speaker's mind and the 'commonplaces of the asylum', they are, necessarily, textual constructions. In light of this, Sexton must be implying that textual reflections of the self are destined to outlast the individual, or that they are, at the very least, more stable, more durable. Even as the poem progresses towards its conclusion, the complicated relationship between being and textuality remains at the forefront of the speaker's contemplations.

> And if you turn away
> because there is no lesson here
> I will hold my awkward bowl,
> with all its cracked stars shining
> like a complicated lie,
> and fasten a new skin around it
> as if I were dressing an orange
> or a strange sun.

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[110] See definition of 'commonplace' in the *Oxford English Dictionary Online* <http://www.oed.com>. [Accessed November 8 2006].

[111] Karin Wulf, *Not All Wives: Women of Colonial Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005), p. 31. See Shari Benstock, *A Handbook of Literary Feminisms* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 140.

While the speaker is aware that the 'awkward bowl' of her 'own head' might not be perceived as an appropriate or useful source of subject matter for her poetry, that for some people there might be 'no lesson there', she remains convinced that there is a value inherent in the *attempt* to communicate one's personal experiences and, moreover, in the attempt to make oneself understood. Although Diana Hume George suggests that the speaker 'must hold her bowl awkwardly' because she is 'partially disarmed by the withdrawal of an invited commonality', it is my feeling that the exact wording of these lines implies something slightly different.[112] It is not, after all, the speaker who is described as being 'awkward', but the bowl that she holds. The speaker does not dissolve into a disordered heap because her invitation is met with (a hypothetical) rejection; rather, she remains composed, assured by her own deeply-held belief in the validity of her project. It is, ultimately, this unyielding belief that gives her the courage to persevere in the endeavour to reach out to others through her personal brand of poetry, to keep reconfiguring her experiences, or fastening new skins around them, until they might begin to resonate in more universal ways. As the bowl of the speaker's mind is imperfect – being 'awkward' and 'cracked' – so it is also likened to a 'complicated lie'. Interestingly, this tentative equation of the self to an inevitable, if 'complicated', 'lie' (which is, by definition, a statement; contingent, therefore, upon one's use of language) is illustrated to some extent by Sexton's proposal of alternative descriptions for the same referents. The 'awkward bowl', for example, is also 'like a complicated lie', while the speaker fastens a 'new skin' around the bowl as if she 'were dressing an orange / *or* a strange sun' [emphasis added]. This technique lends credence to the idea of the self as a lie by gesturing towards the process of selection that attends any articulation of selfhood: the speaker might settle upon one phrase, but she might just as easily, and legitimately, take recourse to another phrase entirely. By taking account of the alternative ways in which the

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[112] Diana Hume George, *Oedipus Anne: The Poetry of Anne Sexton* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1987), p. 10.

individual might express his or her thoughts or ideas, the self, as it is constructed textually, is always a product of certain negations and denials, and, therefore, always a sort of lie.

> Not that it was beautiful,
> but that I found some order there.
> There ought to be something special
> for someone
> in this kind of hope.
> This is something I would never find
> in a lovelier place, my dear,
> although your fear is anyone's fear,
> like an invisible veil between us all . . .
> and sometimes in private,
> my kitchen, your kitchen,
> my face, your face.

In the final lines, the speaker's attempt to reinscribe the 'narrow diary' of the mind into the terms of poetry becomes, more than anything, 'a kind of hope'. The precise nature of this hope, however, remains intentionally obscure: 'someone' might find 'something' in the poem 'sometimes'. Still, the text stands as the primary point of identification between individuals. It is here where we might find our personal experiences most meaningfully reflected, and here where 'my kitchen' might dissolve into 'your kitchen', and 'my face' into 'your face'.

5. Psychoanalysis, Confession, and Control

Given that Sexton was engaged in therapy for most of her adult life, it is perhaps unsurprising that much of her poetry draws heavily on the structures and theories of psychoanalysis. These poems are, in turn, informed by a psychoanalytic approach to confession itself, in which the confession is less the royal way to truth than the mercurial product of the analytical dynamics. Psychoanalysis is, of course, concerned with excavating the space of the unconscious, that fantasized repository of desires, impulses, and memories which have been 'turned away' and 'kept at a distance' from conscious thought.[113] For this reason, the work of psychoanalysis must always be directed less towards what is *confessed* than towards what is *repressed*.

Otherwise known as the 'talking cure', psychoanalysis is a therapy which takes place exclusively within the terms of language, meaning that its course is determined by what the analysand says, by the desires to which he or she is able or willing to confess. In her feminist introduction to the work of Jacques Lacan, Elizabeth Grosz explains that psychoanalysis 'has nothing but the analysand's speech as its object, nothing but literary/linguistic procedures of interpretation, and no diagnostic or prognostic tools other than language'.[114] If, however, the psychoanalytic dialogue is contingent upon speech – and confessional speech in particular – then it is also contingent upon an acknowledgment of the limits of this speech. The unconscious, after all, is comprised of that which has been repressed – those elements of experience which are not eminently accessible or knowable to the analysand. In Peter

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[113] For Freud, 'the essence of repression lies simply in turning something away, and keeping it at a distance, from the conscious'. See Sigmund Freud, 'Repression' (1915), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud,* 24 vols, ed. and trans. by James Strachey and Others (London: Hogarth Press, 1953-74), XIV, pp. 146-58 (p. 147).

[114] Elizabeth Grosz, *Jacques Lacan: A Feminist Introduction* (London: Routledge, 1990), pp. 150-51.

Brooks's view these questions of accessibility and knowability precipitate a crisis in the notion of the true confession:

> The status of the 'true confession' in psychoanalysis is of course complex. What the analysand confesses most easily – what he or she thinks is what needs confessing – is always an object of suspicion to the analyst, since the matter easily confessed is usually not what is causing the neurosis.[115]

For Brooks and Freud alike, the psychoanalytic dialogue reveals the radical instability of the 'true confession'. Because the confession is the product of various evasions, distortions, and translations, after all, it is destined to be discontinuous with the hypothetical 'truths' that Freud projects into the obscure space of the unconscious. This sceptical approach to the 'truth' of confession is broadly consistent with that of Sexton in her poems about therapy, where the psychoanalytic dialogue works to focus the disjunction between confession and truth – a disjunction which means that the truth value of the confession is always and already in question. By examining the concepts and phenomena that structure psychoanalytic theory – and branches of Freudian and Lacanian theory especially – it is also possible to shed new light on the confessional dynamics of Sexton's writing.

As I have already indicated, the concept of the unconscious is the fulcrum on which the whole model of Freudian psychoanalysis pivots. Despite its theoretical pre-eminence, however, the existence of the unconscious is not, according to Freud, straightforwardly demonstrable. This is due in part to the fact that the repressed desires and drives of which the unconscious is comprised are inherently resistant to articulation. Thus unavailable to language, the existence of the unconscious can only be signalled indirectly, through its effects. As Freud describes it, the unconscious is that 'of which we are not aware, but the existence of which we are nevertheless ready to admit to on account of other proofs or

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[115] Brooks, *Troubling Confessions*, p. 52.

signs'.[116] The 'proofs or signs' that testify to the existence of the unconscious are essentially symptoms – distorted, condensed, or displaced manifestations of the repressed drives. While the symptom is only a 'surrogate' for what has been repressed, it is a surrogate which orientates the analyst towards the elusive root of the analysand's pathology: by making the symptom 'speak', the analyst can bring the unconscious 'cause' of the symptom to the surface, at which point it can be confronted, worked through, and discharged.[117]

Although psychoanalysis rests on the premise that the effects of unconscious activity are registered discursively, Freud maintains that the unconscious itself remains stubbornly inimical to the structures of linguistic figuration. The wordlessness of the unconscious is explicable, he argues, by the differing organization of conscious and unconscious ideas or 'presentations'. According to Freud, the 'conscious presentation of the object can . . . be split up into the presentation of the *word* and the presentation of the *thing*', where the 'presentation of the word' consists of memory traces of the word that 'belongs' to the object or idea in question – trace recollections of seeing the word written down or hearing it said out loud – while the 'presentation of the thing' consists of non-linguistic 'memory images' of the thing itself.[118] In Freud's delineation, 'the conscious presentation comprises the presentation of the thing plus the presentation of the word belonging to it, while the unconscious presentation is the presentation of the thing alone. . . . A presentation which is not put into words . . . remains thereafter in the *Ucs.* [unconscious] in a state of repression'.[119] An unconscious mental state is that in which a thing-presentation cannot be linked up to a corresponding word-presentation. In order for an unconscious presentation to become

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[116] Sigmund Freud, 'A Note on the Unconscious in Psycho-Analysis' (1912), *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, 24 vols, ed. and trans. by James Strachey and Others (London: Hogarth Press, 1953-74), XII, pp. 260-66 (p. 260).
[117] Sigmund Freud, 'Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety' (1926), *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, 24 vols, ed. and trans. by James Strachey and Others (London: Hogarth Press, 1953-74), XX, pp. 75-174 (pp. 92-94).
[118] Sigmund Freud, 'The Unconscious' (1915), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, 24 vols, ed. and trans. by James Strachey and Others (London: Hogarth Press, 1953-74), XIV, pp. 159-215 (p. 201).
[119] Freud, 'The Unconscious', p. 201.

conscious, then, it must be 'connected with the word-presentations corresponding to it'.[120] The separation of conscious and unconscious thoughts thus turns on the distinction between words and things. As Malcolm Bowie observes:

> Whether the unconscious is thought of as the domain of the fundamental drives, or as a dynamically maintained repository for memories that are inadmissible to consciousness, Freud clearly does not . . . want speech, or even a ghostly premonition of speech, to penetrate 'down' into it.[121]

In order for its effects to surface in the analysand's speech, the unconscious must undergo various initial translations: it is first translated into the terms of a symptom, and then into the terms of language. Whatever is 'confessed' in the course of the therapy represents, therefore, a profound distortion of the unconscious, and is thus irreconcilable to any fantasized source of 'unconscious truth'.

Freud's formulation of the unconscious as a speechless space is challenged by Jacques Lacan in his systematic critique of Freudian thought. While Freud understands the unconscious explicitly in terms of its unavailability to language, Lacan argues in 'The Insistence of the Letter in the Unconscious' (1966) that there is no escape from language. More specifically, Lacan contends that there are crucial statistical similarities between linguistic structures and the structures of the unconscious that cannot be ignored. This conviction forms the basis of his infamous statement, repeated variously in his lectures and writings, that 'the unconscious is structured like a language'.[122] Here, Lacan aligns the organization of the unconscious to that of language. Still, while the unconscious might be structured *like* a language, it is not structured *by* language: language might be anterior to the development of human subjectivity and the unconscious, but it does not *produce* the

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[120] Sigmund Freud, 'The Ego and the Id' (1923), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, 24 vols, ed. and trans. by James Strachey and Others (London: Hogarth Press, 1953-74), XIX, pp. 3-66 (p. 20).

[121] Malcolm Bowie, *Lacan* (London: Fontana, 1991), p. 52.

[122] Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, ed. by Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. by Alan Sheridan (1977) (London and New York: Karnac, 2004), p. 20.

unconscious. As Bruce Fink observes in *The Lacanian Subject*, Lacan's analogy indicates not that language is the structural cause of the unconscious, but rather that 'the same kinds of relationships exist between unconscious elements as exist in any given language among the elements that constitute it'. The unconscious, he continues, 'is nothing but a chain of signifying elements; such as words, phonemes, and letters, which "unfolds" in accordance with the very precise rules over which the ego or self has no control whatsoever'.[123] There is, then, a structure to the 'unfolding' of the unconscious in speech which is, essentially, linguistic. This unfolding is directed, in no small part, by the force exerted by what Lacan terms 'the real'.

Within contemporary psychoanalytic theory, the concept of the real is notoriously slippery. It is positioned in relation to the symbolic and the imaginary as the third term in Lacan's triadic model of the psyche – a model which builds on the earlier Freudian structure of id-ego-superego.[124] Lacan's symbolic order is in essence the world of language – a world of symbolic elements which do not mean anything in and of themselves, but which acquire meaning in relation to other elements in the system. For Lacan, the individual's entrance into the symbolic realm is necessarily continuous with his or her acceptance of those psychic and social laws which govern desire and communication. As a realm that is defined by laws, the symbolic functions as the basis for all human action and interaction. It is also implicated in the definition of the imaginary, from which it is inextricable. Where the symbolic is dynamic and interactive, however, the imaginary is primarily narcissistic. According to Toril Moi, the imaginary order 'corresponds to the pre-Oedipal period when the child believes itself to be a part of the mother, and perceives no separation between itself and the world'. In the

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[123] Bruce Fink, *The Lacanian Subject: Between Language and Jouissance* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1995), pp. 8-9.
[124] For a fuller discussion of the significance of the term 'order' in the context of Lacan's thought see Bowie, p. 91.

imaginary, she argues, there is 'no difference and no absence, only identity and presence'.[125] Predicated on the individual's desire to fix and incorporate the world of others, the imaginary refers to the order of images – both material and psychic, perceived and phantasmatic, conscious and unconscious – with which the individual seeks to identify in order to galvanize his or her sense of self.

While there are certain similarities between the symbolic and the imaginary, the real differs from each as a result of its fundamental resistance to the logic and terms of language. The real is not consistent with 'reality', but is, rather, 'a world that falls entirely and irretrievably outside the signifying dimension'.[126] In other words, the real is that which precedes or exceeds the symbolic order and the inevitable limits it imposes upon the body and experience. As Fink explains:

> Lacan's real is without zones, subdivisions, localized highs and lows, or gaps and plenitudes: the real is a sort of unrent, undifferentiated fabric . . . The division of the real into separate zones, distinct features, and contrasting structures is a result of the symbolic order, which, in a manner of speaking, *cuts into* the smooth facade of the real, creating divisions, gaps, and indistinguishable entities and laying the real to rest, that is, drawing or sucking it into the symbols used to describe it, and thereby annihilating it. . . . The real is perhaps best understood as that which has not yet been symbolized, remains to be symbolized, or even resists symbolization; and it may perfectly well exist alongside and in spite of the speaker's considerable linguistic capabilities. In that sense, part of the psychoanalytic process clearly involves allowing an analysand to put into words that which has remained unsymbolized for him or her, to verbalize experiences which may have occurred before the analysand was able to think about them, speak of them, or formulate them in any way at all.[127]

The real, then, has much in common with trauma. In Lacan's words, 'it is essentially the missed encounter' – an encounter, that is, which is 'missed' in the sense that it is somehow *too much* for the subject to assimilate to consciousness.[128] I will address the notion of trauma more fully in the chapters on the Holocaust, but in the context of the present discussion it is

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[125] Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory* (London: Routledge, 2001), p. 99.
[126] Bowie, p. 94.
[127] Fink, p. 25.
[128] Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, p. 55.

sufficient to say that the real, like trauma, describes the residue of an experience – a residue that is left over after an experience has been symbolized. Where the real comprises everything that has not been systematized, however, the traumatic designates those aspects of the real which inhibit or endanger the individual's psychic health.

Although the real escapes symbolization, its absence affects the processes of signification. According to Fink's detailed reading of Lacan, the signifying chain is 'as unequivocally determined by what it excludes as by what it includes, by what is within it as by what is without. . . . One could go so far as to say that what, of necessity, remains outside the chain causes what is inside; something must, structurally speaking, be pushed outside for there to even be an inside'.[129]

The categories of the real and the symbolic usefully illuminate the nature of Sexton's confessional poetics. Her poems not only demonstrate the limits of the true confession, but also reveal the limits of language itself by gesturing towards what it cannot represent: the residues of the real. While any number of Sexton's poems telegraph the tension between the real and the symbolic, it is a tension that is staged most consistently in her least known volume of poetry, a collection entitled *Words for Dr. Y.*

Words for Dr. Y comprises what Middlebrook has termed Sexton's 'therapy poems'. Written between 1960 and 1974, these poems were compiled and edited by Linda Gray Sexton, and published posthumously in 1978, a full four years after her mother's death. While Linda has gone on record to state that Sexton specifically set *Words for Dr. Y* aside for posthumous publication, it also seems likely that she deemed some of the poems unsuitable for collection elsewhere. Middlebrook, though otherwise thoroughgoing in her documentation of Sexton's life and compositional schedule, makes scant reference to the poetry that eventually appeared in the volume, stating simply that Sexton slipped these works

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[129] Fink, p. 27.

'silently' into a file labelled 'Words for Dr. Y'.[130] Although the collection which ensued has been neglected within existing Sexton scholarship – perhaps as a result of a paucity of information regarding the circumstances under which many of its poems were composed – it is a collection in which Sexton uses the psychoanalytic scenario to shine a critical light on the troubled relationship between confession and truth.

This sceptical approach to language, and its ability to encapsulate the nuances, ambiguities, and contradictions that characterize intangible, psychic experience, is explicitly foregrounded by Sexton in the second poem of *Words for Dr. Y.*, 'I have words for you, Dr. Y'. As well as foregrounding the limitations of language, 'I have words for you, Dr. Y' is a poem that situates the analysand's 'confession' as the product of an ongoing process of interaction between the analyst and the analysand: what is said in the course of the therapy is shown to be profoundly contingent on factors relating to the specific, transferential dynamics of the psychoanalytic dialogue. Transference, according to Freud, is an essential feature of psychoanalysis: it describes a phenomenon in which the analysand attempts to re-enact his or her role in formative, primary relationships by 'replacing some earlier person with the person of the physician'. In this way, according to Melanie Klein, 'a whole series of psychological experiences are revived, not as belonging to the past, but as applying to the person of the physician at the present moment'.[131] The transference necessarily initiates a *counter*transference in which the analyst responds – to some extent unconsciously – to the transference of the analysand. While the analysand is re-enacting his or her primary relationships through the person of the analyst, then, the analyst is transferring his or her own unconscious desires onto the person of the analysand. As Moi has argued, transference and countertransference transform 'the analytic session into a space where the two participants

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[130] Middlebrook, p. 331.
[131] Melanie Klein, 'The Origins of Transference' (1952), *Selected Melanie Klein*, ed. by Juliet Mitchell (New York: The Free Press, 1986), pp. 201-10 (p. 201).

encounter each other in the place of the Other, in language'.[132] Transference thus illuminates the extent to which psychoanalysis turns on absence, displacement, and substitution. In Peggy Phelan's words:

> The re-enactment staged within the psychoanalytic session is a *mise-en-abyme* of never previously existing relations. . . . While the psychoanalytic dialogue is 'about' the two people physically present in the room, it is also, more profoundly, about the relationship each has with the phantom bodies who will not quit the room. They cannot quit the room for they are 'in' the bodies of those sitting in the room.[133]

Phelan's description of the psychoanalytic encounter as a '*mise-en-abyme* of never previously existing relations' questions the extent to which the dynamics of the analysis can be traced back to any ultimate (or actual) relationship. In this way, the referential dimensions of the analytical discourse are rendered increasingly slippery: the 'cause' of the transference is not only elusive, but 'never previously existing'. If, as Phelan suggests, transference is the result of an infinite chain of substitution, then its relationship to 'truth' is decidedly problematic; what the analysand confesses as a result of the transference is, after all, engineered to elicit a particular response in the analyst, making it – potentially, at least – a strategic, end-driven confession, rather than an attempt to 'tell the truth'. Like language, transference is yet another factor in complicating the relationship between psychoanalytic discourse and 'truth'.

Sexton was acutely sensitive to the role that transference had played in her own therapy. As she recalled in later years, her desire to elicit the approval of Dr. Orne had been the impetus behind her earliest forays into poetry: 'I kept writing and writing and giving them all to him – just from transference. I kept writing because he was approving'.[134] In 'I have words for you, Dr. Y', language is similarly implicated in the processes of transference: the

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[132] Toril Moi, 'Patriarchal Thought and the Drive for Knowledge', *Between Feminism and Psychoanalysis*, ed. by Teresa Brennan (London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 189-205 (p. 197).
[133] Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 171-72.
[134] Middlebrook, p. 42.

speaker views language as a currency of which she is in possession, and which she can thus deploy in the direction of the analyst in a strategic gesture of giving.

I have words for you, Dr. Y.,
words for sale.
Words that have been hoarded up,
waiting for the pleasure act of coming out,
hugger-mugger, higgily-piggily
onto the stage.

And where is the order? you will ask.
A disorderly display of words,
one after the other.
It's a huge gathering ball of words,
not a snowball, but an old string ball,
one from the rag bag.

And where is the order? you will ask.

The opening lines of 'I have words for you, Dr. Y' perfectly encapsulate the logic of transference, and suggest the ways in which it might intervene in the psychoanalytic dialogue. Here, the speaker-analysand's words are offered up to the analyst for his or her scrutiny and, perhaps, approval. Viewed in this light, their truth value is necessarily set in doubt.

Reflecting on the changing role of confession in *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault identifies the birth of psychiatry in the nineteenth century as initiating the last significant paradigm shift in testimonial speech. At this juncture, he argues, the parameters of confession expanded exponentially: as an increasingly medicalized, and increasingly secular, practice, confession was 'no longer concerned solely with what the subject wished to hide, but with what was hidden from himself, being incapable of coming to light except gradually and through the labor of a confession in which the questioner and the questioned each had a part

to play'.[135] Confession is thus recast as the outcome of a negotiation that takes place between the speaking subject and an interlocutor. Formulated in these terms, the confession is also, necessarily, the product of a power struggle, or, more precisely, 'a ritual of discourse . . . that unfolds within a power relationship', and which is radically contingent upon 'the presence (or virtual presence) of a partner who is not simply the interlocutor but the authority who requires the confession, prescribes it, and appreciates it, and intervenes in order to judge, punish, forgive, console, and reconcile'.[136] Power, then, is always and already a factor within the discursive space of the confession. Furthermore, because this power does not necessarily reside with the confessant, he or she is not, and can never be, the sole guarantor of the confession's final meaning. This disequilibrium is clearly flagged in 'I have words for you, Dr. Y', where the analyst is charged with the role of wrenching 'order' and sense from the analysand's 'disorderly display or words'. Throughout 'I have words for you, Dr. Y', the speaker's discourse is punctuated by the analyst's questioning refrain: '*And where is the order?*' This implied dichotomy of chaos and order, as embodied in the figures of the analysand and the analyst respectively, raises issues about the power dynamics that govern the psychoanalytic exchange – issues which have swirled around the discipline of psychoanalysis since its inception: Who controls the trajectory of the analysis? To what extent is the therapeutic dialogue determined by the dynamics of transference and countertransference? Who, ultimately, interprets the analysis and decides what it means? In addressing these questions, and their relevance to Sexton's therapy poems, it is necessary to appreciate the ways in which they speak to the very structure of psychoanalysis. As Freud explains in his 1937 essay 'Constructions in Analysis', this structure is, critically, dialogical:

> The analyst finishes a piece of construction and communicates it to the subject of analysis so that it may work upon him; he then constructs a further piece out of the

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[135] Foucault, pp. 66-67.
[136] Foucault, pp. 61-62.

> fresh material pouring in upon him, deals with it in the same way and proceeds in this alternating fashion until the end.[137]

According to Freud, then, the analyst intervenes in the construction of the analysand's discourse. Consequently, what the analysand says during the course of the therapy is less 'the truth' than the product of specific dialogical dynamics. In order to intervene in this way, the analyst must first decide what the analysand is trying to communicate at any given time; it is the analyst, therefore, who endeavours to wrench order from the perceived chaos of the analysand's speech. In the context of 'I have words for you, Dr. Y', this urge to order is demonstrated repeatedly in the analyst's refrain, '*And where is the order?*'

Although the speaker ascribes this phrase to the person of the analyst, she does so provisionally, as part of a hypothetical exchange: '*And where is the order?* you will ask'. The speaker has internalized the voice of the analyst, and that voice is synonymous with a demand for 'order'. As a result, the tensions between order and chaos that are typically played out through the figures of the analyst and the analysand are transposed to the sphere of the speaker's own imagination. By way of this transposition, Sexton aligns the processes of psychoanalysis with those of creative praxis, both of which aim to generate coherent narratives from a confused jumble of psychic fragments. In fact, throughout *Words for Dr. Y.*, psychoanalysis seems to function as a metaphor for the act of writing or, more specifically, the act of confessional writing

The structural similarities of psychoanalysis and writing have been crucial to the development of psychoanalytic theory, and are foregrounded in seminal discourses by Freud and Lacan, and, more recently, in the work of Shoshana Felman, Barbara Johnson, and Nicole Ward Jouve. According to Jouve, writing itself can 'act as the psychoanalyst holding a mirror up to the self so that it can perceive its own bodily symptoms, the voices . . . that want

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[137] Sigmund Freud, 'Constructions in Analysis' (1937), *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, 24 vols, ed and trans. by James Strachey and Others (London: Hogarth Press, 1953-74), XXIII, pp. 255-70 (pp. 260-61). Also see Brooks, *Troubling Confessions*, p. 53.

to speak but do not know how to'.[138] Writing thus 'installs a scene' in which the narrative voice is, simultaneously, 'patient, mirror and analyst'.[139] For Sexton, the similarities between writing and psychoanalysis are equally pronounced:

> When writing you make a new reality and become whole . . . It is like lying on the analyst's couch, re-enacting a private terror, and the creative mind is the analyst who gives pattern and meaning to what the persona sees only as incoherent experience.[140]

Here, Sexton again stresses the distance that lies between the incoherent matter of raw experience and the patterned, 'meaningful' narratives that arise from the processes of psychoanalysis and literary composition alike. In writing, as in psychoanalysis, reality is 'made' rather than transcribed, and in this way it is always and already a fiction rather than a fact.

Sexton's construction of signification in 'I have words for you, Dr. Y' converges, to some extent, with Lacan's critique of Saussurean linguistics in 'The Insistence of the Letter in the Unconscious'. At the heart of Saussure's argument lies the belief that language is a synchronic system – or a synchronic system of signs, to be exact – and that the meaning of each sign emerges through its difference to other signs. Each sign is comprised of a signifier (a sound-image) and a signified (an underlying idea or concept). While Saussure acknowledges that there is a slippage between the signifier and the signified, 'an incessant sliding of the signified under the signifier' that renders the meaning of the signifier unstable, he maintains that the signifier has some sort of vertical relationship to the signified.[141] This

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[138] Nicole Ward Jouve, 'Helene Cixous: from inner theatre to world theatre', *The Body and the Text: Helene Cixous, Reading and Teaching*, ed. by Helen Wilcox and Others (London: Palgrave, 1991), pp. 41-48 (p. 45).
[139] Jouve, p. 45.
[140] Sexton qtd. in Middlebrook, p. 64.
[141] Jacques Lacan, 'The insistence of the letter in the unconscious', trans. by Jan Miel (1966), *Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader*, 2nd edn., ed. by David Lodge with Nigel Wood (London: Longman, 2000), pp. 62-87 (p. 68).

fraught relationship is usefully reinterpreted by the political theorist Fredric Jameson in *The Prison-House of Language*:

> [I]t is not so much the individual word or sentence that 'stands for' or 'reflects' the individual object or event in the real world, but rather that the entire system of signs, the entire field of the *langue* [the objective structure of signs], lies parallel to reality itself; that it is the totality of systematic language, in other words, which is analogous to whatever organized structures exist in the world of reality, and that our understanding proceeds from one whole . . . to the other, rather than on a one-to-one basis.[142]

Jameson's reading of Saussure is useful here because it foregrounds the connection between signs and reality without suggesting that there is any direct, unambiguous relationship between the two systems. For Lacan, the relationship between the signifier and the signified is even more tenuous. Lacan places the signifier in a position of ascendency over the signified. In his view, the relationship between different signifiers, rather than the relationship between the signifier and the signified, is the most important linguistic relation by far. This is, to some extent, because signifiers cannot refer directly and/or singularly to any specific signified – if they could, then the meaning of the signifier would always be stable and guaranteed, and this is quite clearly not the case. As Bowie observes:

> The domain of the signifier is independent and self-governing. Anyone who goes in search of meaning at its source, or in its essential forms, has no choice but to travel by way of language, and at every moment on this journey variously connected signifiers extend to the horizon in all directions. When the signified seems finally to be within reach, it dissolves at the explorer's touch into yet more signifiers.[143]

For Lacan, then, the signifier doesn't lead – even in the most convoluted way – to a signified; it just leads to another signifier, and another signifier, and another signifier, and so on *ad infinitum*. Because the signifier isn't fused to a particular mental concept, the chain of

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[142] Fredric Jameson, *The Prison-House of Language* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1972), pp. 32-33.
[143] Bowie, p. 64.

signifiers has nothing to anchor it: it is free-floating and mobile.[144] In Lacanian thought, then, the world of the signifier is formulated explicitly as a world of play.

In the context of 'I have words for you, Dr. Y', the concept of play goes some way to illuminating the speaker's approach to signification. Defining her deployment of words as a 'pleasure act', the speaker situates her use of language firmly in the register of linguistic play, something other than truth-telling. After all, by telegraphing the sensual dimensions of speech – the oral and aural 'pleasure' we achieve through the 'act' of making noise – she necessarily implies that what she says is governed by sound rather than sense, and by enjoyment rather than any demand for accuracy or lucidity. Through the introduction of nonsense terms, such as 'hugger-mugger' and 'higgily-piggily', Sexton interrogates the capacity of language to signify. Because these words don't have any stable referents, they work to reveal the irremediable disalignment of language and reality, which, in turn, forecloses the possibility of a 'truthful' discourse.

In *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (1905), Freud associates this open, experimental approach to speech with the early phases of infantile development, in which the child achieves a special 'pleasure in nonsense'.[145]

> During the period in which the child is learning how to handle the vocabulary of his mother-tongue, it gives him obvious pleasure to 'experiment with it in play' . . . [a]nd he puts words together without regard to the condition that they should make sense, in order to obtain from them the pleasurable effect of rhythm or rhyme.[146]

While Freud associates this playful pursuit of 'pleasurable' effects in speech with the early phases of infantile development, it is also, of course, the domain of the poet. What is poetry if not an attempt to 'obtain . . . the pleasurable effect of rhythm or rhyme'? For Freud, the

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[144] Lacan also describes the signifiers in the signifying chain 'as rings of a necklace that is a ring in another necklace made of rings'. See Lacan, 'The insistence of the letter in the unconscious', p. 68.
[145] Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious* (1905), trans. by James Strachey and ed. by Angela Richards (London: Penguin, 1991), p. 175.
[146] Freud, *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*, p. 174.

pleasure that ensues from linguistic experimentation derives, at least in part, from its regressive character. It is, necessarily, an attempt to re-establish 'old liberties' and recapture a remembered pleasure in 'liberated nonsense'.[147] Viewed in this light, the 'hugger-mugger' and 'higgily-piggily' that we find in 'I have words for you, Dr. Y' might be read as gesturing back towards an infantile state which is, in turn, representative of the regressive movement on which all analytic therapies rely.

This regressive movement is reflected, to some extent, in the system of imagery that Sexton deploys in 'I have words for you, Dr. Y'. Although the speaker claims to confound logic with her 'disorderly display of words', her discourse seems to unfold with a certain coherence: the words are 'a huge gathering ball of words, / not a snowball, but an old string ball, / one from the rag bag'. While we might expect this 'string' of signification to lead to some fantasized source of unconscious truth, it seems more akin to Lacan's signifying chain, in which one signifier leads to another signifier without ever getting close to anything 'real'. Here, then, one end of this 'ball of words' runs simply and inevitably to the other end, back to the beginning of the signifying chain.

Throughout 'I have words for you, Dr. Y', Sexton draws out the metaphorical dimensions of language itself. Words are dramatically and variously resituated as concrete artefacts: one word is 'a pearl', another is 'a slim precise girl', and yet another is 'a beach stone in the hand'. This stacking of 'word' metaphors culminates in the poignant analogy with which the poem concludes:

> A word, a sunflower seed.
> One we would surely overlook.
> So easily lost, a dead bee.
> So vulnerable.
> She is already trampled, that one,
> having traveled so far from the heart.
> She weighs so little.

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[147] Freud, *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*, pp. 175-77.

She is so light and vulnerable.
She is the dead bee called love.

Here, then, language is the subject, as well as the agency, of metaphor. In this way, Sexton works to demythologize the transparent status of language. Referring to the word in abstract-metaphorical terms as 'a sunflower seed' and 'a dead bee', she necessarily foregrounds the abstract-metaphorical lineaments of the words themselves, and thus destabilizes the fragile assumptions on which the system of signification is based. It is, moreover, the logic of substitution which underlies the creation of the poetic metaphor – and, more broadly, language – that also underlies the generation of the symptom in psychoanalysis. In fact, as Phelan observes in *The Politics of Performance*, substitution is one of the major bridges between signifying and therapeutic praxes.

> All symptoms, like all words, are metaphors, substitutes for unportable things. Sometimes particular metaphors are loudly obvious, other times they appear to be transparent, fully representative of the real they seek to convey. The meaning of a word/symptom is not, and cannot be, singular or stable: the meaning changes according to the context in which it appears and speaks. Symptoms like words are repetitious, undecidable, resistant to singular interpretations. The self-reproducing symptom creates a permeable and fluid set of meanings.[148]

As the meaning of the metaphor is never 'singular or stable', it seems appropriate that it should feature so prominently in a poem that seeks to register the ambiguities, complexities, and contradictions that problematize confessional language. Certainly, Sexton's attempt to stress the substitutive function of the signifier serves to uphold the poem's sceptical approach to language and its capacity to represent reality. This scepticism also seems to lie behind the speaker's classification of the word as a 'dead bee' (a description that is replicated in 'Said the Poet to the Analyst', which was published in the same year that Sexton wrote 'I have words for you, Dr. Y'). What is dead, after all, is radically discontinuous with what is living;

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[148] Phelan, p. 168.

the word, that 'dead bee', therefore, operates at a predictable remove from the stuff of life itself, from whatever the speaker sought to convey.

In the context of psychoanalysis, then, 'truth' is 'not necessarily the truth of verifiable fact, the truth of an event; it can be the truth of desire, of affect, of that which makes sense of things in an emotional register. . . . [T]he transferential bond of psychoanalysis . . . can produce matter that is undoubtedly "true" according to some measure of psychic need and desire. But not necessarily true in the world of outer events. . . . It's a matter of "psychic truth" rather than "material truth"'.[149] In conversation with Barbara Kelves in 1968, Sexton makes a similar distinction between competing definitions of truth, acknowledging the extent to which fact is always, necessarily, subordinated to what she identifies as the 'truth' of the poem:

> Many of my poems are true, line by line, altering a few facts to get at the story's heart. . . . Each poem has its own truth [and] poetic truth is not necessarily autobiographical. It is the truth that goes beyond the immediate self, another life. I don't adhere to literal facts all the time; I make them up whenever needed. . . . I want the reader to feel, 'Yes, yes, that's the way it is'. I want them to feel as if they were touching me. I would alter any word, attitude, image, or persona for the sake of a poem.[150]

Radically discontinuous with 'literal fact', truth is re-conceptualized as a function of the text, the impulse that governs the internal logic and emotional consistency of the poem. By extension, the referential function of the 'I' in Sexton's poetry is complicated, becoming an effect of confessional, linguistic practice – something that is consciously deployed by Sexton to formalize and perpetuate the illusion of a coherent personality behind the poem. While Sexton's use of the personal pronoun might, on the surface, appear to designate a coherent, unified subjective position, it is, in my view, always signposting the conflicts and contradictions of subjectivity, the *in*coherence and *dis*unity that are, in Sexton's view,

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[149] Brooks, *Troubling Confessions*, p. 54

[150] Barbara Kelves, Interview with Anne Sexton (1975), *No Evil Star: Selected Essays, Interviews, and Prose*, ed. by Steven E. Colburn (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1985), pp. 83-111 (p. 103).

inextricable from the human experience. Given that conventional linguistic economies are structurally resistant to the symbolization of a multiple, mobile, and contradictory selfhood, they are destined to repress and singularize the strange plurality of human experience. For Sexton, then, language forecloses the possibility of 'true' confession because it is incapable of revealing everything; one always has to choose which 'truth' to articulate: 'behind everything that happens to you, every act, there is another truth, a secret life'.[151]

Even if reality is not directly accessible via the signifier, logic would suggest that the 'reality' of the signified somehow precedes the birth of the signifier: it stands to reason that a concept has to exist before it can be named. For Lacan, however, as for Saussure, the reverse is true. In his view, the signified is generated as an effect of the signifier – a contention that has necessary implications for subjectivity and, more specifically, its availability to linguistic forms of representation. After all, if the signifier 'I' has no signified, then what becomes of the subject? This is a problem to which Lacan addresses himself in 'The Subject of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire'. Here, he posits the 'I' as a signifier which only 'designates the subject insofar as he is currently speaking'. 'That is to say', he continues, 'it designates the enunciating subject but does not signify him'.[152] Rejecting the Cartesian cogito, Lacan contends that the 'I' is a position in language, a signifier 'which represents the subject for another signifier'.[153] In this formulation, the subject is not a thinking, feeling, active, and autonomous being, but an 'event' which takes place within the terms of language. As Bowie remarks, the signifier 'I', and the subject towards whom it gestures, is 'no longer a substance endowed with qualities, or a fixed shape possessing dimensions, or a container awaiting the multifarious contents that experience provides: it is a series of events within

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[151] Patricia Marx, Interview with Anne Sexton (1966), *No Evil Star: Selected Essays, Interviews, and Prose*, ed. by Steven E. Colburn (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1985), pp. 70-82 (p. 74).
[152] Jacques Lacan, 'The Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire in the Freudian Unconscious' (1966), *Écrits*, trans. by Bruce Fink (London: W. W. Norton and Company, 2006), pp. 671-702 (p. 677).
[153] Lacan, 'The Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire', p. 694.

language, a procession of turns, tropes, and inflections'.[154] This is a problem to which Julia Kristeva turns in her 1987 study of melancholia, *Black Sun*. Here, Kristeva argues that the individual subject attempts to compensate for the sense of loss that ensues as a result of his or her entrance into the symbolic order – the loss, that is, of an 'unnameable domain', not dissimilar to Lacan's real – by 'setting up an "I"' to secure the status of the self within language. (This is, of course, consistent with the logic that underpins Lacan's concept of the Mirror Stage[155]). As Kristeva goes on to explain, however, this security is merely a fantasy: the 'I' is not consistent or stable, it is simply capable of cultivating this illusion:

> The 'I' then asserts itself on the field of artifice: there is a place for the 'I' only in play, in theatre, behind the masks of possible identities, which are extravagant, prestigious, mythical, epic, historical, and esoteric as they are incredible. Triumphant, but also uncertain.[156]

The 'I' of Sexton's poetry, and even that of her more autobiographical prose, is, I would argue, always hyperconscious of its artificial status. For Sexton, the 'I' is invoked less as a designation of a stable subjectivity than as an agency through which she can question the tangibility, consistency, and stability of subjectivity itself.

In one of her letters to Dr. Orne, Sexton conceptualized the self in explicitly textual terms: 'All I am is a trick of the words writing themselves', she stated, an automatic consequence of an engagement with the terms of language.[157] Elsewhere, in a 'personal record' of her therapy, she further lamented the difficulty of 'telling the truth' about herself:

> I am nothing, if not an actress off the stage. In fact, it comes down to the terrible truth that there is no true part of me. . . . It is as if I will permit my therapy and think it all very interesting as long as it doesn't touch me. I am a story-maker . . . doesn't it strike

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[154] Bowie, p. 76.
[155] See Jacques Lacan, 'The mirror stage as formative of the function of the "I" as revealed in psychoanalytic experience'(1949), *Écrits*, trans. by Bruce Fink (New York and London: W. W. Norton and Company, 2006), pp. 75-81.
[156] Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, trans. by Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), p. 145.
[157] Sexton qtd. in Middlebrook, p. 82.

> [Dr. Orne] that this 'story' is too pat???? I know that often people in analysis will tell these great stories about having intercourse with their father etc. and that they are fictitious but are a childhood fantasy. I have read about this – and also know that they still have some validity . . . I am acting the part of a nice case history. . . . I suspect that I have no self so I produce a different one for different people. I don't believe me, and seemed forced to constantly establish long fake and various personalities.[158]

As Sexton indicates here, deception and performance are woven into the fabric of psychoanalysis. While this is evident in much of Freud's writing, it is especially pronounced in his 1920 essay *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. In this seminal work, he describes the infant game of *fort-da* – a game which Freud advances as an example of the child's attempt to reconcile, or master, the intermittent absences of the mother. In *fort-da*, as played by Freud's one year-old grandson and witnessed by Freud, the child throws a wooden toy attached to the end of a piece of string over the side of his cot and utters the word '*fort*', the German for 'gone'. Then, pulling on the string, he draws the toy back to him and announces its reappearance with the exclamation '*da*', translated as 'there'. As Freud proceeds to explain, 'This was the complete game – disappearance and return. As a rule one only witnessed its first act . . . though there is no doubt that the greatest pleasure was attached to the second act'. In Freud's view, the game 'was related to the child's greatest cultural achievement – the instinctual renunciation . . . which he had made in allowing his mother to go away without protesting. He compensated himself for this, as it were, by himself staging the disappearance and return of the objects within his reach'.[159] Within the context of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, then, and within the context of psychoanalysis more generally, *fort-da* is a scene of performance; a scene in which the child re-enacts a separation from, and retrieval of, the maternal object. As the game itself is demonstrably performative – in that it is a representative enactment of something that happens elsewhere, at another time – so, too, is

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[158] Sexton qtd. in Middlebrook, pp. 62-63.
[159] Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), *The Essentials of Psycho-Analysis*, ed. and trans. by James Strachey and Others (London: Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1986), pp. 218-68 (p. 225).

Freud's delineation of the game. Throughout his analysis of *fort-da*, Freud takes immediate recourse to theatrical metaphors: it is a 'staging' of disappearance and return, and one which is divided into two distinct 'acts'. In other words, he throws an intentional emphasis on the dramatic dimensions of the child's behaviour. Beyond this, Freud works to locate the theatrical processes of infantile play that propel the *fort-da* game in relation to adult forms of 'artistic play and artistic imitation', which 'are aimed at an audience [and] do not spare the spectators . . . the most painful experiences'.[160] While this description – of the adult's engagement in forms of play and imitation that 'do not spare the spectators . . . the most painful experiences' – refers explicitly to artistic praxis, it also seems to approximate what happens in psychoanalysis. Psychoanalysis is, after all, a scenario in which the analysand re-imagines his or her 'most painful experiences' in front of the 'audience' of the analyst. Extrapolating this line of logic a little further, one might wish to argue that performance – and the rhetoric of performance – is central to all the major constellations of psychoanalytic thought: it is discernible in various measures in the dynamic processes of 'acting out', transference, and countertransference, and also in the critical concept of the 'scene' – as in the hypothetical 'primal scene' and the 'scene' of psychoanalysis. As the therapeutic procedures of psychoanalysis are propelled by strategies of performance that are traceable to the *fort-da* game, so they are propelled by strategies of linguistic play – such as slips, jokes, lies, and silences – which are also at work, if rather more obliquely, in the gestures of Freud's grandson.

The connections that Freud weaves between play, art, artifice, and psychoanalysis in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* are drawn out by Sexton in 'I have words for you, Dr. Y'; a poem which, though concerned explicitly with psychoanalysis, is couched in the diction of

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[160] Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, p. 227.

performance.[161] From the outset, the speaker's words spill out 'hugger-mugger, higgily-piggily / onto the stage' in a 'disorderly display'. More particularly, by situating speaking itself as a 'pleasure *act*', Sexton situates the analysand's discourse as a pretence, and thus renders it necessarily remote from any hypothetical site of truth [emphasis added].

As in Freud's delineation of the *fort-da* game, then, speaking is part of an act, a performance. The 'pleasure act' in 'I have words for you, Dr. Y' is, however, radically distinct from the act that Freud describes in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle.* For Freud, after all, the *fort-da* game is not explicable solely in terms of the infant's desire for pleasure. Rather, it goes *beyond* the pleasure principle, in that it does not provide the infant with an unmitigated sense of delight. In this context, the performance serves a larger purpose, enabling the child to take an active role in a situation within which he was initially passive:

> At the outset he was in a *passive* situation – he was overpowered by the experience [of his mother's departure]; but, by repeating it, unpleasurable though it was, as a game, he took on an *active* part. These efforts might be put down to an instinct for mastery that was acting independently of whether the memory was in itself pleasurable or not.[162]

In essence, the game of *fort-da* forces the infant out of his comfort zone and in doing so it encourages him to gain mastery of an 'unpleasurable' experience. In 'I have words for you, Dr. Y', on the other hand, the performance in question operates exclusively at the level of enjoyment, as a 'pleasure act'. While the speaker's verbal outpourings give rise to a pleasurable sense of release, she is not able to gain any real mastery of her 'unpleasurable' experiences.

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[161] We find a similar range of diction in another poem from the same collection, in which the speaker reflects on the theatrical dimensions of the analytic process: 'We make a stage set out of my past / and stuff painted puppets into it'. See Anne Sexton, 'What has it come to, Dr. Y.', *Words for Dr. Y: Uncollected Poem with Three Stories*, ed. by Linda Gray Sexton (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1978), pp. 14-15.
[162] Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, p. 226.

6. Gendering Confession

I alluded earlier to the tensions between order and chaos that are borne out in the relationship between the analyst and the analysand in *Words for Dr. Y.* I would like now to suggest that these tensions – in that they are essentially tensions between rationality and irrationality – are also gendered. Throughout the volume, the disorderly, 'incoherent experience' of the female analysand is given 'pattern and meaning' by the authoritative, rational person of the male analyst.[163] In an untitled poem dated February 23, 1965, which begins with the line 'Blue eyes wash off sometimes', the speaker addresses the analyst as 'Father Inc.', 'little Freud', and 'Mr. Man'. These designations not only masculinize the person of the analyst but also imply his complicity with the structures of patriarchal power. He is, variously, the embodiment of institutional authority ('Father Inc.'), academic authority ('little Freud'), and patriarchy itself ('Mr. Man').[164] Conversely, in 'What has it come to, Dr. Y', Sexton formulates the analyst's mastery and the analysand's dependence in terms and images that are subtly sexualized; terms and images which are redolent of traditional romance narratives:

> Time after time I fall down into the well
> And you dig a tunnel in the dangerous sand,
> You take the altar from a church and shore it up.
> With your own white hands you dig me out.
> You give me hoses so I can breathe.
> //
> You are as brave as a motorcycle.

The speaker's account of her relationship to the analyst is, seemingly, predicated on a gendered distinction between passive femininity and active masculinity. It is, after all, the female speaker who falls 'down into the well' and needs to be rescued, and the male analyst, 'brave as a motorcycle', who, invariably, comes to her assistance.

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[163] Sexton qtd. in Middlebrook, p. 64.
[164] See Anne Sexton, 'Blue eyes wash off sometimes', *Words for Dr. Y: Uncollected Poems with Three Stories.*, ed. by Linda Gray Sexton (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1978), p. 16.

According to Moi in her essay 'Patriarchal Thought and the Drive for Knowledge', the whole theory of psychoanalysis turns on the axis of gender; it is born, after all, 'in the encounter between the hysterical woman and the positivist man of science'.[165] For Moi, this paradigmatic interaction, from which the tenets of psychoanalytic theory ensue, constitutes a dramatic 'reversal of the traditional roles of subject and object, of speaker and listener'.[166] While this 'reversal' might seem to subvert the conventional order of gender relations by transforming female patients from listeners into speakers, it simultaneously upholds this order by equating listening with rationality, order, and empowerment:

> [I]f Freud's . . . act of listening represents an effort to include the irrational discourse of femininity in the realm of science, it also embodies [his] hopes of extending [his] own rational understanding of psychic phenomena. *Grasping* the logic of the unconscious, [he wants] to make it accessible to reason. . . . [T]here is at once a colonizing, rational impulse and a revolutionary effort to let female madness speak to male science.[167]

Moi's account of the psychoanalytic encounter relies heavily on distinctions between speaking and listening, activity and passivity, and reason and emotion that are, in her view, inextricable from patriarchal constructions of gender. This approach is indebted to the writing of contemporary feminist scholars such as Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray, who famously draw on the work of pivotal male theorists, including Freud, Lacan, and Jacques Derrida, in order to demonstrate and critique the connections between gender, power, and language.

Taking her cue from Derrida, Cixous argues in her 1975 essay 'Sorties' that Western metaphysical space is organized around a network of binary oppositions – oppositions between activity and passivity, culture and nature, intelligibility and sensitivity, for example – in which one term is always privileged over the other. For Cixous, the hierarchical structure of each of these binary oppositions is expressly traceable to the paradigmatic coupling of man

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[165] Moi, 'Patriarchal Thought and the Drive for Knowledge', p. 196.
[166] Moi, 'Patriarchal Thought and the Drive for Knowledge', p. 196.
[167] Moi, 'Patriarchal Thought and the Drive for Knowledge', pp. 196-97.

and woman: just as man is privileged over woman, the positive, 'masculine' term of the binary opposition is granted privilege over its 'feminine' correlative. In accordance with this gendered logic, 'masculine' activity is privileged over 'feminine' passivity, culture is privileged over nature, and intelligibility is privileged over sensitivity, and so on. In this web of antagonistic thinking, femininity is repeatedly debased; it is always on the passive, absent or 'negative' side of the binary opposition. As a result, argues Cixous, there are no positive constructions of femininity in the Western cultural imaginary: 'Either woman is passive or she doesn't exist'.[168]

Proceeding from a similar ideological premise, Irigaray analyses the systematic exclusion of women from Western philosophical discourses, history, and even language. In her seminal critique of sexual difference, *Speculum of the Other Woman* (1974), Irigaray unpicks Freud's construction of femininity as the negative 'other' of masculinity. More explicitly, she argues against his account of psychosexual development, in which woman's relation to man is theorized exclusively in terms of absence or lack. According to Irigaray, this Freudian approach to subjective development vexes the possibility of female self-representation. If, after all, woman is defined in the negative, then how can she secure a positive position for herself within the terms of a masculine discourse? 'Any theory of the subject', Irigaray explains, 'has always been appropriated to the "masculine". When she submits to such a theory, woman fails to realize that she is renouncing the specificity of her own relationship to the imaginary. Subjecting herself to objectivization in discourse – by being "female". Re-objectivizing her own self whenever she claims to identify herself "as" a masculine subject'.[169] Caught between the options of remaining silent and attempting to

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[168] Hélène Cixous, 'Sorties', *Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader*, 2nd edn., ed. by David Lodge with Nigel Wood (London: Longman, 2000), pp. 264-70 (p. 265).
[169] Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman* (1974), trans. by Gillian C. Gill (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1985), p.133.

represent herself in a 'man-made language'[170], woman becomes eminently vulnerable to misinterpretation.

> 'She' is indefinitely other in herself. That is undoubtedly the reason she is called temperamental, incomprehensible, perturbed, capricious – not to mention her language in which 'she' goes off in all directions and in which 'he' is unable to discern the coherence of any meaning. Contradictory words seem a little crazy to the logic of reason, and inaudible for him who listens with ready-made grids, a code prepared in advance. . . . In her statements – at least when she dares to speak out – woman . . . just barely separates herself from some chatter, an exclamation, a half-secret, a sentence left in suspense – when she returns to it, it is only to set out again from another point of pleasure or pain. One must listen to her differently in order to hear an 'other meaning' which is constantly in the process of weaving itself, at the same time ceaselessly embracing words and yet casting them off to avoid becoming fixed, immobilized. For when 'she' says something, it is already no longer identical to what she means. . . . It is therefore useless to trap women into giving an exact definition of what they mean, to make them repeat so that meaning will be clear. They are already elsewhere in the discursive machinery.[171]

For Irigaray, as for Cixous, 'masculine' discourses – based as they are on an either/or model of expression – exemplify the logic of patriarchal binarism. Plotted in accordance with the 'logic of reason', these discourses are rooted in principles of rationality, linearity, and fixity that are designed to eradicate ambiguity and contradiction. Because Cixous and Irigaray posit femininity as precisely ambiguous and contradictory – a 'style' which 'resists and explodes all firmly established forms, figures, ideas, concepts'[172] – it is not readily assimilable to these 'rational' principles. As a result, both Cixous and Irigaray advocate the disruption of 'masculine' discursive economies, and the 'dichotomizing' logic on which they are predicated, as a way of opening language up to the accommodation of feminine experience.[173] This dream of a feminine language is famously expressed in Cixous's concept

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[170] See Dale Spender, *Man Made Language* (London: Routledge, 1980), p. 12.
[171] Luce Irigaray, 'This sex which is not one', trans. by Claudia Reeder, *New French Feminisms*, ed: by Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron (Brighton: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1980), pp. 99-106 (p. 103). For more on Irigaray's theorization of the relationship between women and language see Moi, *Sexual/Textual: Feminist Literary* Theory, pp. 145-46.
[172] Luce Irigaray, 'The Power of Discourse and the Subordination of the Feminine' (1985), *The Irigaray Reader*, ed. by Margaret Whitford (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), pp. 118-32 (p. 126).
[173] Irigaray, 'The Power of Discourse and the Subordination of the Feminine', p. 127.

of *écriture feminine* or 'feminine writing' and in Irigaray's (very similar) concept of *le parler femme* or 'womanspeak'. Although *écriture feminine* and 'womanspeak' are each associated with multiplicity, plurality, fluidity, flexibility, and inclusivity, neither Cixous nor Irigaray is able to define the characteristics of these 'feminine' modes with any clarity; to do so, after all, they would have to take recourse to the binary logic of patriarchal discourse that these modes are explicitly intended to countermand. As Cixous writes in 'The Laugh of the Medusa':

> [Ecriture feminine] can never be theorized, enclosed, coded – which doesn't mean that it doesn't exist. But it will always surpass the discourse that regulates the phallocentric system; it does and will take place in areas other than those subordinated to philosophic-theoretical domination.[174]

Likewise, for Irigaray, womanspeak is, by definition, that which escapes theorization: 'I simply cannot give you an account of "womanspeak": one speaks it, it cannot be meta-spoken'.[175] Clearly, one of the problems with this type of approach is that it risks re-inscribing the binary logic it seeks to demolish. Woman is again situated on the dark, mysterious, unknowable side of the binary opposition: she is multiple, fluid, and impossible to fix – just as she is in patriarchal discourse.

The subordination of women by and within patriarchal discourse is, in Irigaray's thought, nowhere more pronounced than in the dynamics of psychoanalysis. As Irigaray writes in 'The Poverty of Psychoanalysis', the mute interpretation conducted by the analyst 'comes to mean an act which gives the analyst mastery over the analysand, an instrument in the hands of a master and *his* truth'.[176] Even when he is silent – or precisely when he is silent

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[174] Hélène Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa' (1976), *New French Feminisms*, ed. by Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron (Brighton: Harvester, 1980), pp. 245-64 (p. 253). For a fuller discussion of Cixous and her thought see Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics*, p. 109.

[175] Irigaray qtd in Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics*, p. 145.

[176] Luce Irigaray, 'The Poverty of Psychoanalysis', *The Irigaray Reader*, ed. by Margaret Whitford (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), pp. 79-104 (p. 84).

– the analyst is controlling the meaning of the analysand's confession and moulding it in accordance with the dictates of '*his* truth'.

In 'I have words for you, Dr. Y', as in the theoretical writings of Cixous and Irigaray, the restrictive, prescriptive dimensions of language are associated explicitly with masculinity:

> Words waiting, angry, masculine,
> with their fists in a knot.
> Words right now, alive in the head,
> heavy and pressing as in a crowd.
> Pushing for headroom, elbowing,
> knowing their rights.

Again, words are not authentic, creative translations of *what the speaker means*, but symbolic components of a patriarchal system similar to the 'code prepared in advance' to which Irigaray refers in 'This sex which is not one'. In the related acts of writing and speaking she is required to configure her own, 'feminine' experience in terms that are fundamentally 'masculine'. Sexton's choice of imagery here emphasizes the violence of this translation. Words are 'angry', 'with their fists in a knot', 'heavy' and 'pressing', 'knowing their rights'. By way of these aggressive images, Sexton gestures towards the violence of language itself – and, more specifically, the violence that language enacts upon human experience, knocking it out of its original shape and into something distorted and strange.

This equation of language with violence is a key feature of Lacanian thought, in which the process of signification is theorized as a brutal intrusion into the realm of the real. As Fink explains, the division of the Lacanian real into 'separate zones, distinct features, and contrasting structures is a result of the symbolic order, which, in a manner of speaking, *cuts into* the smooth facade of the real, creating divisions, gaps, and distinguishable entities and laying the real to rest, that is, drawing or sucking it into symbols used to describe it, and

thereby annihilating it' [emphasis in original].[177] The deathly force of the signifier is identified by Lacan himself in his essay 'Position of the Unconscious'. Here, 'the letter kills' by bringing 'the meaning of death' into the speaking subject.[178] Derrida gestures towards a similar phenomenon in 'Tympan' with his introduction of the phrase *coup de donc* or the 'blow of therefore', which installs a temporal boundary between a 'before' and an 'after'.[179] This 'blow' is the blow of philosophy, but is also, in a broader sense, the blow of language. As Julian Wolfreys explains, in Derrida's *coup de donc* a 'cut is made, an incision, which is also an inscription. One starts and so decides on the undecidable. One begins to economize in writing, by writing, or speaking, delivering a blow, the circumcision as decision'. This decision, which is telegraphed by the emergence of speech or writing, is 'always a response, it is that which wounds and announces a boundary or border that leaves the trait which it enacts, even as it remarks it, on the blank page'.[180]

Associating the violence of language with masculinity, Sexton, in 'I have words for you, Dr. Y', identifies 'vulnerable' words as feminine: '*She* is already trampled, that one, / having traveled so far from the heart' [emphasis added]. Where masculine words jostle for position, 'elbowing' and 'pushing for headroom', their feminine counterparts are 'light and vulnerable', words 'we would surely overlook'. The emphatic slightness of these feminine words replicates the vulnerable position of women within language, and their tendency to be eclipsed or ignored by dominant patriarchal discourses. More interestingly, however, the words that Sexton designates as feminine are words which have distinct connections to the fantasy of confessional speech. They are, pointedly, words that have travelled 'far from the heart'; words, therefore, that are intimately linked to female interiority and the body. Within

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[177] Fink, p. 24.
[178] Jacques Lacan, 'Position of the Unconscious', *Écrits*, trans. by Bruce Fink (New York and London: W. W. Norton and Company, 2006), pp. 703-21 (p. 719).
[179] Jacques Derrida, 'Tympan' (1982), *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. by Alan Bass (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1985), pp. xi-xxix.
[180] Julian Wolfreys, *Derrida: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: Continuum, 2007), p. 42.

the space of the poem, masculine words are associated with the head – pushing as they do for 'headroom' – while feminine words are associated with the heart – the place from which they are supposed to have travelled. Beyond reproducing the gendered binary distinction between the intellectual and the emotional around which patriarchal discourse turns, this manoeuvre also posits feminine speech as unassailably confessional – a speech which issues directly from the body.

Confession, of course, has longstanding links to feminist practice and has been heavily implicated in the (re)mobilization of the Anglo-American women's movement in the early 1960s – not least because of its eminent centrality to the operations of 'consciousness-raising' groups. In these groups, private, female experience formed the impetus for political awareness and, ultimately, action. As Imelda Whelehan explains in *Modern Feminist Thought:*

> Consciousness raising was a central process in politicizing the personal: not only was it intended to awaken women to the injustices of their secondary social position, but they were encouraged to reassess their personal and emotional lives, their relation to their families, their lovers and their work. Not only might this allow women to express their dissatisfaction with occasions when they felt that they had been exploited or coerced in the name of duty, love or guilt, but it was hoped that it might also permit women to negotiate an autonomous identity beyond those associated with family duties. Although this initial process focused very much on the individual, and could be seen therefore as politically naive or regressive, or tending towards personal therapy, the ultimate aim of consciousness raising is an analytical one, enabling the members of a group to view women's oppression in more abstract, even theoretical terms. Although the term consciousness raising (CR) has become associated with radical feminist politics in particular, one could argue that all feminist positions utilize such a process; particularly effective in feminist politics because it necessitates the scrutiny of one's private life and therefore gives the lie to the notion that this area of human experience is, or should be, beyond the purview of political intervention. The evasion of 'domestic' issues in politics had excluded women for centuries.[181]

For the most part, then, the second wave political agenda was built around issues which were regarded as 'private', and thus beyond the traditional scope of political intervention – issues,

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[181] Imelda Whelehan, *Modern Feminist Thought: From the Second Wave to 'Post-Feminism'* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995), p. 13.

that is, such as abortion, contraception, the family, domestic violence, rape, and the sexual division of labour. These issues, of course, loom large in Sexton's poetry, which, like second wave feminism, is concerned with excavating 'private' female experience.

'Self in 1958' was first drafted (and abandoned) by Sexton in the June of 1958, before being revised in the same month of 1965 for publication in *Live or Die*. The title immediately advertises the poem as a record of the speaker's identity at a particular point in history but, as Sexton goes on to demonstrate, the stable and definitive sense of self to which the speaker seems to lay claim in the terms of the title is one that she fails to grasp, let alone communicate, within the body of the poem.

What is reality?
I am a plaster doll; I pose
with eyes that cut open without landfall or nightfall
upon some shellacked and grinning person,
eyes that open, blue, steel, and close.
Am I approximately an I. Magnin transplant?
I have hair, black angel,
black-angel-stuffing to comb,
nylon legs, luminous arms
and some advertised clothes.

I live in a doll's house
with four chairs,
a counterfeit table, a flat roof
and a big front door.
Many have come to such a small crossroad.
There is an iron bed,
(Life enlarges, life takes aim)
a cardboard floor,
windows that flash open on someone's city,
and little more.

Someone plays with me,
plants me in the all-electric kitchen,
Is that what Mrs. Rombauer said?
Someone pretends with me –
I am walled in solid by their noise –
or puts me upon their straight bed.
They think I am me!
Their warmth? Their warmth is not a friend!

> They pry my mouth for their cups of gin
> and their stale bread.

While the poem opens on the broad, philosophical question 'What is reality?' this expansive line of enquiry narrows considerably by the final stanza:

> What is reality
> to this synthetic doll
> who should smile, who should shift gears,
> should spring the doors open in a wholesome disorder,
> and have no evidence of ruin or fears?
> But I would cry,
> rooted into the wall that
> was once my mother,
> if I could remember how
> and if I had the tears.

In the poem's closing stanza, then, the abstract, philosophical question 'What is reality?' is transformed into a question which, in its explicit location of 'reality' in relation to a subject (in this case the speaker's 'synthetic doll'), works to (re)formulate reality as a subjective phenomenon. In this way, reality, and abstract principles in general, are shown to be meaningful only to the extent that they are experienced by, or impact upon, the individual. Through this personalization of reality, Sexton interrogates the very terms of that which the confessional poem is so often assumed to take as its ultimate referent: personal 'reality'. Like 'An Obsessive Combination of Ontological Inscape, Trickery and Love' and 'For John, Who Begs Me Not to Enquire Further' – both of which are contemporaneous with the initial draft of 'Self in 1958' – the poem moves towards a contemplation of what sort of reality, if any, the confessional text might be capable of mediating: if the speaker is not able to grasp the nature of her own, personal reality, then how could she possibly communicate it to others? Furthermore, the poem throws light on the tensions between subjective and objective conceptualizations of reality: is reality what seems 'real' to the 'synthetic doll' of the speaker

or what appears to be 'real' to the outsiders who see her posing in her 'doll's house' wearing her 'advertised clothes'? As is implied throughout the poem in the detached tone of the speaker's narration, her appearance and behaviour might be 'real' in a phenomenal sense, but they each conceal more than they reveal, being part of the elaborate façade which the speaker uses to dupe the world, and, indeed, herself: 'They think I am me!' If, however, the speaker is aware of a psychic, subjective 'reality' that is not continuous with her observable behaviour and which is somehow, possibly, more 'real' than the one she describes, then it is also one to which she is unable to gain access; she is so alienated from her personal reality, in fact, that she cannot even 'remember' how to cry.

According to Nelson in *Pursuing Privacy in Cold War America*, the confession's claim to 'tell all' is entirely spurious: any declaration of openness is as much a fiction as the content of the confession itself. 'The confession that appears to "tell all"', she observes, 'hides all the more effectively for telling only some, and so renders a paradoxical privacy'. As a result, the confessional poet 'can appear to comply with the imperative to be open – all the while subverting it – by taking advantage of one of confessional poetry's defining tropes: the fiction of sincerity'.[182] In the context of 'Self in 1958', this 'fiction of sincerity' is generated by Sexton through images of open doors and windows, as well as through her insistent use of the first-person pronoun in its nominative, possessive and objective forms: the words 'I', 'me' and 'my' occur a total of seventeen times in the course of the poem's four ten-line stanzas. This persistent first-person 'I' is also echoed in the 'eyes that cut open' in the third line of the first stanza. Given the phonetic synonymy of 'I' and 'eye', this image of 'eyes that cut open' makes a metaphorical gesture towards the action of self-exposure that is supposed to constitute the confession – an action in which the 'I' is both subject and object; it is, simultaneously, that which is 'cut open' and that which does the cutting. While these

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[182] Nelson, p. 89.

pronouns, and allusions to pronouns, contribute to the illusion of openness which is, for Nelson, a staple feature of the confessional text, the only thing to which the speaker is able to confess is, paradoxically, her profound inability to confess; her failure to provide, in other words, the full account of the 'self' that the title promises. Having lost sight of 'reality', the speaker can only describe herself in metaphors that situate her artificial, inanimate status and her consequent lack of autonomy. At the level of rhythm, moreover, the clipped, monosyllabic diction out of which these metaphors are constructed works to replicate the fractured texture of the speaker's sense of self. She is the 'plaster doll' with 'nylon legs' and 'luminous arms' with whom someone 'plays' and 'pretends'. In 'Self in 1958' these doll metaphors have a particular resonance, flagging up the terms of Sexton's confessional praxis, in which speakers are not 'real' autonomous beings but fictional representations with which the poet plays and pretends.

The location of the self as a fictional (or textual) construct is further implied in a question which the speaker poses in the opening stanza: 'Am I approximately an I. Magnin transplant?' As in 'An Obsessive Combination of Ontological Inscape, Trickery and Love, Sexton makes use – albeit a less conspicuous use – of a palindromic construction in order to infer the subject's potential status as 'a trick of the words writing themselves'.[183] The 'Am I' with which the question opens is reversed in the first three letters of 'I. Magnin', the name of a luxury American department store that prospered in the years following the Second World War. In this way, the speaker implies that her sense of identity, as designated by the 'I', is embedded in the packaged versions of femininity that the bourgeois arm of postwar consumer culture seeks to promote: she is an approximation, or reconfiguration, of the feminine ideal she describes in the final stanza who 'smiles', springs open the door to her home of 'wholesome disorder' and betrays 'no evidence of ruin or fears'.

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[183] Middlebrook, p. 82.

The anxieties about feminine identity, domesticity, and personal agency that Sexton sets out in 'Self in 1958' are developed more fully in her 1969 collection, *Love Poems* – a collection which occupies a seminal position in women's writing, giving American literature what Middlebrook describes as 'its first fully sexual heroine'. Situated in the '"post-pill paradise" of sexual revolution', *Love Poems* maps the 'pleasure centers' of a woman's body after it has been 'ripened' by the experiences of marriage and childbirth.[184] It is a collection in which Sexton appears transfixed by the desires and denials of the flesh – and of female flesh in particular. In titles such as 'The Breast', 'The Touch', 'The Kiss', 'The Ballad of the Lonely Masturbator' and 'Knee Song' she shatters the taboos that swirl around the sexed body with her open and candid approach. While Sexton's dual inscription of female embodiment and female subjectivity in *Love Poems* is largely coextensive with the aims and objectives of second wave feminism, however, her relationship to the burgeoning women's movement was characterized by ambivalence. When questioned about her position on feminism, Sexton would often become evasive or start to digress. In 1961, as the recipient of a fellowship from the Radcliffe Institute designed to 'harness the talents of "intellectually displaced women"', Sexton was interviewed by the educational specialist Alice Ryerson about her background and career aspirations.[185] During this interview she telegraphed the impact that gender had on the professional development of women poets, and their ability to dedicate themselves to their art: 'There are so many lady poets and they're almost all so bad. . . . There are whole clubs of women poets: it's all right to be a poet if you're a woman. Therefore you can be a bad one. . . . Women don't strive to make anything real out of it. They just dabble in it'.[186] Only money, which arrived in the form of the Radcliffe scholarship, seemed to grant legitimacy to the creative enterprise:

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[184] Diane Wood Middlebrook in her introduction to Anne Sexton, *Love Poems* (1969) (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1989), p. vii.
[185] Middlebrook, p. 144.
[186] Sexton qtd. in Middlebrook, p. 151.

It immediately made what I was doing more respectable, to my husband. I wasn't taking so much from my family; I gave more back. You see, you always have a guilty feeling that it's selfish, because everyone says 'Why isn't it enough to be a wife and mother?' I still remember my mother-in-law saying 'Why aren't your husband and children enough – why don't you make it a hobby?' You have this guilt. But if you get this amount of money, then everyone immediately thinks you're respected, and beyond that, you're contributing.[187]

Although her daughter later disputed this version of events, it is clear that Sexton *perceived* some resistance to her writing, and that this resistance bore no small relationship to her roles as a housewife and mother.[188] Interrogating and redefining the parameters of these roles would come to constitute a vital part of Sexton's writing and of the second wave project – both in the context of consciousness-raising and in the slew of seminal texts that would be published in the coming decade: Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963); Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics* (1970); and Germaine Greer's *The Female Eunuch* (1970), to name a few.[189] Sexton did recognize the ideological intersections of her own work with the objectives of the women's movement, and towards the end of her career she began locating herself as a trailblazing proto-feminist. 'There was no women's lib when I was starting' she declared in an interview with Gregory Fitz Gerald. 'As a matter of fact, it was very shocking that I wrote so personally about a woman'.[190] Certainly, Sexton's poems had generated a huge amount of controversy within the literary establishment. As I mentioned earlier, James Dickey once commented that 'it would be hard to find a writer who dwells more insistently on the pathetic and disgusting aspects of bodily experience'.[191] A few years later, in his review of *Live or*

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[187] Sexton qtd. in Middlebrook, p. 152.
[188] See Middlebrook, p. 152.
[189] Sexton's eldest daughter, Linda, recalls her mother's particular engagement with Friedan's writing: 'Though my mother never applied the word "feminist" to herself, when I was fifteen she gave me her copy of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*. Complete with her scribbled notes across the page . . . that showed her identification with the problems Friedan described'. See Linda Gray Sexton, *Searching for Mercy Street: My Journey Back to My Mother, Anne Sexton* (London: Little Brown, 1994), p. 98.
[190] Gregory Fitz Gerald, Interview with Anne Sexton, *No Evil Star: Selected Essays, Interviews, and Prose*, ed. by Steven E. Colburn (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1985), pp. 180-206 (p. 197).
[191] James Dickey, 'Review of *All My Pretty Ones*', reprinted in *Anne Sexton: Telling the Tale*, p. 106 (p. 106).

Die, the poet Louis Simpson referred to Sexton's poem 'Menstruation at Forty' as 'the straw that broke the camel's back', crossing an invisible line into the realm of the too personal.[192] As Sexton herself understood, the controversy was due in no small part to her confessional style, to her willingness to write 'so personally' about the intimate experiences of womanhood. In poems like 'Menstruation at Forty', 'The Ballad of the Lonely Masturbator', and 'In Celebration of My Uterus', after all, Sexton confronts the reader with a double gesture of exposure: her speakers are not only confessing to their 'private' desires, they are also denuding the female body. Through this textual exposure of flesh, tissue, and other viscera, Sexton provides a potent metaphor for literary confessionalism that also speaks to the work of second wave feminism and its attempt to inscribe the lived experiences of female embodiment into the realm of representation.

'In Celebration of My Uterus' is one of the poems that best exemplifies the convergence of Sexton's confessionalism with the ideology of the second wave and its insistence upon the politicization of the personal. In it, as in 'For John, Who Begs Me Not to Enquire Further', the speaker's personal reflections open out into an acknowledgement of the essential unity of the self, the other, and the world beyond.

> Sweet weight,
> in celebration of the woman I am
> and of the soul of the woman I am
> and of the central creature and its delight
> I sing for you. I dare to live.
> Hello, spirit. Hello, cup.
> Fasten, cover. Cover that does contain.
> Hello to the soil of the fields.
> Welcome roots.

Like the 'inverted bowl' of the speaker's head in 'For John, Who Begs Me Not to Enquire Further', the 'cup' of the womb in 'In Celebration of My Uterus' becomes the locus of a

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[192] Louis Simpson qtd. in Middlebrook, p. 264.

collective identification.[193] Just as the speaker of 'For John' recognizes the universal resonances of what she finds in the 'bowl' of her 'own head', so the speaker of 'In Celebration of My Uterus' celebrates an international community of women through what begins as a celebration of the 'cup' of her own womb. It is not insignificant that Sexton should alight upon domestic objects such as bowls and cups as metaphors in these two, discrete contexts; associated with the sphere of the home, they not only imply the 'private' nature of their referents (in this case the head and the uterus) but also suggest the ways in which these referents might themselves function as metonyms for experiences that are – like bowls and cups – commonplace or ordinary. While the domestic would seem to bring with it a sense of safety, Sexton's exultant celebration of the female anatomy in 'In Celebration of My Uterus' is anything but safe. What she does here is, I would argue, both radical and political. In response to the pervasive absence of the female body (as it is experienced by women) from existing literary discourses, Sexton introduces the womb into world of the poem with the phrase 'Hello, cup'. With this introduction, she inaugurates a new era of (positive) female representation. The womb is no longer the symbol of a debased and distorted femininity, but one of female empowerment and camaraderie. From the opening lines of the first stanza, in fact, the womb has represented a femininity that is liberated from patriarchal control. Pathologized and condemned by a (masculine) medical establishment that 'wanted to cut [it] out', the womb confounds the dire prognoses. Rather than 'sick unto dying', the womb is 'singing like a schoolgirl', 'not torn', not 'empty'.

> Each cell has a life.
> There is enough here to please a nation.
> It is enough that the populace own these goods.
> //
> Many women are singing together of this:

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[193] A subsequent reference in the final stanza of 'In Celebration of My Uterus' is even more evocative of the bowl in 'For John, Who Begs Me Not to Enquire Further': 'Sweet weight, / in celebration of the woman I am // *let me carry bowls for the offering*' [emphasis added].

one is in a shoe factory cursing the machine,
one is at the aquarium tending a seal,
one is dull at the wheel of her Ford,
one is at the toll gate collecting,
one is tying the cord of a calf in Arizona,
one is straddling a cello in Russia,
//
one is staring out the window of a train
in the middle of Wyoming and one is
anywhere and some are everywhere and all
seem to be singing, although some can not
sing a note.

In a short note on the uses of tradition in Sexton's poetry, Myra Stark considers the influence of Walt Whitman on 'In Celebration of My Uterus'. Echoing 'the diction, the images, the very techniques of *Song of Myself*', Sexton invokes Whitman's seminal text as a way of placing 'what might be considered startling or unusual about her poem within a literary tradition'.[194] Just as Whitman's *Song of Myself* hails an abandonment of the fixed poetic forms associated with the 'old world' of Europe, Sexton's poem seeks to depart from traditional, patriarchal representations of the female body and female experience.

The confessional mode is, of course, an essential feature of both poems; for each speaker, self-examination gives rise to the ability to identify sympathetically with others and situate one's own experiences in a broader context. Whitman's speaker identifies variously with men, women, and children: 'I am large', he declares, 'I contain multitudes'.[195] As part of her homage to Whitman, Sexton opens 'In Celebration of My Uterus' with a similar statement of the capaciousness of the subject: '*Everyone in me* is a bird' [emphasis added]. This homage reaches its peak in Sexton's catalogue of the 'Many women singing together', which, with its chains of anaphoric repetition, replicates the structure of the most memorable sequences of *Song of Myself* – the sequences that attempt to convey the rich variety of

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[194] Myra Stark, 'Walt Whitman and Anne Sexton', *Anne Sexton: Telling the Tale*, ed. by Steven E. Colburn (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1988), pp. 242-44 (p. 242).
[195] Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* (1855), ed. by Malcolm Cowley (London: Penguin, 1986), p. 85.

American life.[196] In 'In Celebration of My Uterus', as in *Song of Myself*, then, the confessional 'I' is both specific and representative, vacillating between the self and the human universe in a way that suggests Sexton's commitment to promoting solidarity between women.

Sexton's various attempts to inscribe the condition of femininity speak to a broader desire to recuperate marginal experiences – or experiences that have been evacuated from mainstream discourses – to the realm of literary representation. While I return to questions relating to Sexton's formulation of female experience throughout the course of this thesis, I turn, in the next chapter, to a consideration of the treatment she lends to an event which posed a formidable challenge to writers and artists in the postwar period: the Holocaust.

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[196] The sequence from Whitman's *Song of Myself* to which I am referring is long, and I quote only a few lines here in order to illustrate its formal similarity to the latter phases of Sexton's 'In Celebration of My Uterus': 'The duck-shooter walks by silent and cautious stretches, / The deacons are ordained with crossed hands at the altar, / The spinning-girl retreats and advances to the hum of the big wheel, / The farmer stops by the bars of a Sunday and looks at the oats and rye, / The lunatic is carried at last to the asylum a confirmed case'. See Whitman, p. 37.

PART TWO: NEGOTIATING THE HOLOCAUST

7. 'I think it would be better to be a Jew': Representing the Holocaust in Postwar Poetry

Within contemporary critical accounts of the twentieth century, the Second World War is regularly theorized in relation to the concept of trauma. Rooted in the Greek *τραῦμα*, meaning *wound*, trauma refers, in its traditional medical usage, to an injury that results as a consequence of external violence, as well as to the effects of this injury upon the routine functionality of the body as a whole. In a 1917 lecture, however, Freud re-plotted these physical co-ordinates along explicitly psychological lines, making the case for trauma as 'an experience which within a short period of time presents the mind with an increase of stimulus too powerful to be dealt with or worked off in the normal way', and which thus results in 'permanent disturbances' to the normative operations of the human psyche.[1] While Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis have usefully identified the extent to which Freud's model of psychical trauma is structurally consistent with that of physical trauma – both being patterned on 'the idea of a violent shock, the idea of a wound and the idea of consequences affecting the whole organisation' – the bodily wound gestures towards a possibility for healing that is necessarily foreclosed to the 'permanent' wound of the mind.[2] This quality of permanence resides in the fact that trauma falls beyond the range of familiar, customary or anticipated experience, and is, as a result, inassimilable to the prevailing cognitive schemata that help us to make sense of the

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[1] Sigmund Freud, 'Fixation to Traumas – The Unconscious' (1917), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, 24 vols, ed. and trans. by James Strachey and Others (London: Hogarth Press, 1953-74), XVI, pp. 273-85. See also Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis, *The Language of Psycho-Analysis*, trans. by Donald Nicholson-Smith (London: Hogarth Press, 1973), p. 466.

[2] Laplanche and Pontalis, p. 466.

world.[3] Thus resistant to psychic integration, comprehension, and linguistic symbolization, trauma takes on the character of a symptom that is only discernible at the level of an unconscious 'acting out'.[4] For Freud, this means that the traumatic event is reproduced 'not as a memory but as an action'; the survivor 'repeats it without knowing . . . that he is repeating, and in the end, we understand that this is his way of remembering'.[5] Atemporal and unconsciously repetitive, trauma, as Cathy Caruth theorizes in *Unclaimed Experience,* 'is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual's past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature – the way it was precisely not known in the first instance – returns to haunt the survivor later on'.[6] As the traumatic event is always, somehow 'missed' – both as it happens and as it returns to 'haunt' the individual – it comes to resemble history, which, like trauma, 'is not fully perceived as it occurs' and 'can be grasped only in the very inaccessibility of its occurrence'.[7]

By foregrounding the shared structural logic of history and trauma, Caruth gestures towards the possibility of understanding trauma in terms of collective experience – as a socio-cultural, as well as an individual, phenomenon. While the concept of collective trauma is not new, it has gained a special currency in recent scholarly discourses, as a framework through which the cultural impact of

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[3] Laura S. Brown quotes from the definition of trauma found in the *American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual*, which defines the trauma victim as a person who 'has experienced an event that is outside the range of human experience'. See Laura S. Brown, 'Not Outside the Range: One Feminist Perspective on Psychic Trauma', *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, ed. by Cathy Caruth (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), pp. 100-12 (p. 100).

[4] Elsewhere, Freud explains that the patient 'acts [the trauma] before us, as it were, instead of reporting it to us'. See Sigmund Freud, *Inhibitions, Symptoms, and Anxiety* (1926), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, 24 vols, ed. and trans. by James Strachey and Others (London: Hogarth Press, 1953-74), XX, pp. 75-176 (p. 90). See also Laplanche and Pontalis, p. 4.

[5] Freud, *Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety*, p. 150.

[6] Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), p. 4.

[7] Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, p. 18.

catastrophic twentieth-century events might be creatively reassessed. The bedrock of this scholarship is perhaps Kai Erikson's 1976 analysis of the Buffalo Creek disaster, *Everything in Its Path*, in which the author famously articulates the distinction between individual and collective trauma. In contrast to individual trauma, which Erikson formulates as 'a blow to the psyche that breaks through one's defenses so suddenly and with such brutal force that one cannot react to it effectively', collective trauma comprises 'a blow to the basic tissues of social life that damages the bonds attaching people together and impairs the prevailing sense of communality'. Characterized as a 'rational response to abrupt change',[8] collective trauma 'works its way slowly and even insidiously into the awareness of those who suffer from it, so it does not have the quality of suddenness normally associated with [individual] "trauma"'.[9] Although Erikson's theory helpfully illustrates the way in which collective trauma strains the connective fibres of social life and 'impairs the prevailing sense of communality' (assuming that such a thing exists in the first place), it nonetheless asserts that the traumatic event is not missed, but perceived, assimilated, and comprehended. Still, whereas Erikson contends that 'the extraordinary event' is eminently available to collective consciousness – its potential consequences being 'so great they cannot be ignored' – much of the recent scholarship on the Holocaust, Hiroshima, and the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center has adhered more closely to the Freudian model of trauma favoured by Caruth, in which the traumatic incident is conceptualized in terms of its abruptness, its

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[8] Jeffrey C. Alexander, 'Toward a Theory of Cultural Trauma', *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*, ed. by Jeffrey C. Alexander et al (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 2004), pp. 1-30 (p. 3).

[9] Kai Erikson, *Everything in its Path* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1976), p. 154. See also Kai Erikson, 'Notes on Trauma and Community', *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, ed. by Cathy Caruth (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), pp. 183-99 (p. 187).

immediate repression, and its belated re-emergence in the processes of acting out and working-through.[10]

For Ana Douglass and Thomas A. Vogler in *Witness and Memory*, contemporary valorizations of the traumatic event speak specifically to a 'return of the real'; that is, a dramatic reinstallation of 'the real' as a material concept, 'an event marked by trauma', that breaks with poststructuralist configurations of 'the real' as a purely linguistic or textual effect.[11] In this analysis, the real, like trauma and history, its structural corollaries, does exist, but it is always and already closed off to direct understanding or figuration.[12] As a result, the traumatic incident 'bears a striking similarity to the always absent signified or referent of the poststructuralist discourse, an object that can by definition only be constructed retroactively, never observed'. Implying the existence of a 'real' referent, but one which is forever inaccessible, then, the traumatic event 'allows a return to the real without the discredited notions of transparent referentiality often found in traditional modes of historical discourse'.[13]

This impingement of the 'real' upon questions of reference in creative, critical and historical discourses has become a central preoccupation of Holocaust scholarship. Serving as a limit case for trauma, through which the cultural systematization of traumatic events might be productively examined, the Holocaust presents survivors and writers alike with a profound representational conundrum: to what extent can atrocities of the type perpetrated against the Jews in the Second World War ever be known, understood or transmitted? For Elie Wiesel, a survivor of

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[10] Arthur G. Neal, *National Trauma and Collective Memory: Major Events in the American Century* (New York and London: M. E. Sharpe, 1998), p. 10.
[11] Ana Douglass and Thomas A. Vogler, eds., *Witness and Memory: The Discourse of Trauma* (London: Routledge, 2003). Introduction, p. 4.
[12] As Frederic Jameson has argued, 'History is what hurts'. See Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (London: Menthuen, 1981), p. 102. Also see Douglass and Vogler, p. 5.
[13] Douglass and Vogler, p. 5.

Auschwitz, 'the Holocaust transcends history' in its status as 'the ultimate event, the ultimate mystery, never to be comprehended or transmitted'.[14] In a similar vein, Claude Lanzmann has remonstrated that 'there is an absolute obscenity in the very project of understanding' the Holocaust, making the 'refusal of understanding . . . the only possible ethical and . . . operative attitude'.[15] Though the Holocaust poses an insurmountable challenge to those who seek to symbolize its horrors, Lanzmann and Wiesel each maintain the necessity of testimony: in Wiesel's words, '[n]ot to transmit an experience is to betray it'.[16] The already stated impossibility of such a transmission, however, means that traumatic experience is *always* betrayed – be it through silence or articulation. The experience of the survivor who stays silent elides symbolization in the same way as that of the survivor who speaks. As James E. Young explains, after all, the survivor is confronted with the 'impossible task [of showing] somehow that their words are material fragments of experiences, that the current existence of their narrative is causal proof that its objects also existed in historical time'.[17] Unable to inscribe the painful tangibility of the traumatic experience into an intangible world of words, the survivor is inevitably beset by a sense of failure:

> The more insistently a survivor-scribe attempts to establish the 'lost link' between his text and his experiences in the text, the more he inadvertently emphasizes his role as maker of the text, which ironically – and more perversely still – further undermines the sense of unmediated fact the writer had attempted to establish. Both the writer's perceived absence from the text

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[14] Douglass and Vogler, pp. 24-25.
[15] Claude Lanzmann qtd. in Cathy Caruth, 'Recapturing the Past: Introduction', *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, ed. by Cathy Caruth (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), pp. 151-57 (p. 155).
[16] Elie Wiesel qtd. in Kali Tal, *Worlds of Hurt: The Literatures of Trauma* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 120.
[17] James E. Young, *Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust: Narrative and the Consequences of Interpretation* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1990), p. 23. For a broad overview of Young's argument see Tal, pp. 47-49.

> and his efforts to relink himself to it thus seem to thwart – and thereby inflame still further – the testimonial impulse.[18]

Young proceeds to foreground the inherent instability of survivor testimony, which is, he argues, always informed by the already existing conceptual frameworks 'through which the narrator has apprehended experience'. Even the Holocaust, he tells us, 'can never lie outside of literature, or understanding, or telling'.[19] It is by way of this conceptual manoeuvre, in which survivor testimonies are understood as constructed narratives that are always mediated by 'the "vocabulary" of our culture', and not as objective historical facts, that Young is able to defend the use of the Holocaust as a metaphor, 'a universal point of reference for all kinds of evil, oppression and suffering'.[20]

In order for the Holocaust to operate as a metaphor, however, the terms of its reference have first to be established: What is the Holocaust? How has it been constructed in the cultural imaginary? Who has the 'right' to speak of it? As a number of scholars have noted, the history of Holocaust publishing has been a fraught one, and one that itself seems to bear the mark of trauma. Dori Laub draws attention to the fact that Holocaust testimonies were only 'receivable' after a 'historical gap': the 'degree to which bearing witness was required, entailed such an outstanding measure of awareness and of comprehension of the event – of its dimensions, consequences, and above all, of its radical *otherness* to all known frames of reference – that it was beyond the limits of human ability (and willingness) to grasp, to transmit, or to imagine'.[21] Primo Levi's *If This Is a Man* was initially refused by a number of

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[18] Young, *Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust*,, pp. 24-25.
[19] Young, *Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust*, p. 98.
[20] Young, *Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust*, pp. 130-32.
[21] Dori Laub, 'Truth and Testimony: The Process and the Struggle', *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, ed. by Cathy Caruth (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), pp. 61-75 (p. 68).

publishing companies in the years following the war, receiving only a small print run of 2500 copies in 1947, before being picked up by Enaudi, translated into English and distributed on a mass scale in the late 1950s. As Levi later explained, 'in that harsh post-war world, people didn't have much desire to go back in their memories to the painful years that had just finished'.[22] Similarly, Tadeusz Borowski's 'This Way For the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen', based on memories of his imprisonment in Auschwitz and Dachau, did not appear in the United States until 1959, a full eight years after his death by suicide. Though histories of the Holocaust, such as Léon Poliakov's *Harvest of Hate* (1951), Gerald Reitlinger's *The Final Solution* (1953), and Joseph Tenenbaum's *Race and Reich* (1956), began appearing in the early 1950s, it was not until the publication of Raul Hilberg's *The Destruction of the European Jews* that the events of the Holocaust were mediated to the American public on any large scale. Refused by Columbia University Press, Princeton University Press, Oklahoma University Press, and Yad Vashem, Hilberg's manuscript was finally accepted by Quadrangle Books in 1961. In this way, Holocaust publishing registers the temporal delay of traumatic response.

While the Holocaust cast a heavy shadow over the postwar cultural landscape, its gradual emergence as a 'singular paradigmatic event' raised questions about how – and even if – it might be communicated, commemorated, and represented by writers who had no direct involvement in the atrocities.[23] In his critique of 'Daddy', a 1962 poem by Sylvia Plath in which she famously deploys Holocaust imagery to metaphorize the power dynamics of a father-daughter relationship, George Steiner queried whether 'anyone themselves uninvolved and long after the event [commits] a

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[22] Primo Levi, *If This Is A Man* (1947) (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979), p. 17.
[23] Douglass and Vogler, p. 21

subtle larceny when they invoke the echoes and trappings of Auschwitz and appropriate an enormity of ready emotion to their own private design?' As we have seen, however, direct experience of the Holocaust does not necessarily equate to a mastery of the subject, and Steiner goes on to speculate that '[p]erhaps it is only those who had no part in the events who can focus on them rationally and imaginatively'.[24]

For a generation of American writers who had witnessed the Nazi genocide in Europe and the detonation of the atomic bomb over Japan at a remove and after the fact, the need 'to find language for this world without values' was overwhelming.[25] Still, as Norman Mailer asserts in 'The White Negro' (1959), even those who had no obvious part in the traumatic convulsions of World War II, who had only 'witnessed' events secondarily and belatedly, were not released from the burden of responsibility; any attempt to understand the Holocaust or Hiroshima was necessarily entangled with the attempt to understand the self, and its potential to commit acts of gross brutality in extreme circumstances:

> [I]f tens of millions were killed in concentration camps out of the inexorable agonies and contractions of super-states founded upon the always insoluble contradictions of injustice, one was then obliged also to see that no matter how crippled and perverted an image of man was the society he had created, it was nonetheless his creation, his collective creation (at least his collective creation from the past) and if society was so murderous, then who could ignore the most hideous of questions about his own nature?[26]

As large-scale traumas demand personal reflection, so this reflection must turn on an ability to identify with the victims and/or perpetrators of this trauma, and it is in this

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[24] George Steiner, 'Dying is an Art' (Review of *Ariel*), *Language and Silence* (London: Faber and Faber, 1967), pp. 324-34 (p. 330). Also see Antony Rowland, *Awkward Poetics in the Work of Sylvia Plath, Geoffrey Hill, Tony Harrison, and Ted Hughes* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005), p. 2

[25] Al Alvarez, 'The Literature of the Holocaust', *Beyond All This Fiddle* (London: Allen Lane, the Penguin Press, 1968), pp. 22-53 (p. 26)

[26] Norman Mailer, 'The White Negro', *Advertisements for Myself* (New York: Putnam, 1959), pp. 337-58 (p. 338).

way that the metaphorization of events like the Holocaust is made possible. In a 1999 essay, Hilene Flanzbaum observes that for a number of American poets writing in the shadow of World War II, the theme of Jewish identity provided a convenient means through which to engage, indirectly, with the traumatic legacy of the Holocaust. By way of a short story by John Berryman and Karl Shapiro's Pulitzer Prize-winning volume of poetry, *V-Letter* (1944), Flanzbaum proposes that Jewishness circulates within early post-Holocaust culture as an unstable ethnic identity, which becomes 'more and more difficult to specify'.[27] This is exemplified, in her view, by Berryman's 1945 short story, 'The Imaginary Jew', in which a Southern boy, possessed of 'a special sympathy and liking for the Jews'[28], is violently threatened by a group of men who mistakenly read his support of President Roosevelt's foreign policy as a sign of his Jewishness: 'The imaginary Jew I was was as real as the imaginary Jew hunted down, on other nights and days, in a real Jew'.[29] In the final analysis, Jewishness is not designatable by way of racial, physical, or cultural criteria. Rather, as Flanzbaum explains, 'Jewishness is a state of mind – either something one mysteriously feels, or something just as mysteriously perceived by one's audience'.[30] By positing the potential coincidence of Jewish and non-Jewish experience in 'The Imaginary Jew', Berryman gives rise to the 'metaphorical Jewishness' that we find occurring in middle generation poetry, and, particularly, in the work of Berryman, Lowell, Plath, and Sexton.[31] Trading on and interrogating the inextricability of Jewish identity and victimhood in the post-Holocaust imaginary, these poets each alight upon

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[27] Hilene Flanzbaum, 'The Imaginary Jew and the American Poet,' *The Americanization of the Holocaust*, ed. by Hilene Flanzbaum (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), pp. 18-32 (p. 30).
[28] Flanzbaum, p. 28
[29] John Berryman, 'The Imaginary Jew' (1945), *The Freedom of the Poet* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1976), pp. 359-66 (p. 366).
[30] Flanzbaum, p. 29.
[31] Flanzbaum, p. 29

'metaphorical Jewishness' as a means of creatively re-imagining experiences of victimization and marginalization in mid-century America.

In his epochal *Life Studies*, published in 1959, Lowell includes, amongst the poetry, a short autobiographical sketch entitled '91 Revere Street', in which he traces his ancestry, 'remembering' his ascendants through the stories and artefacts that have been passed down through generations of the Lowell family. While '91 Revere Street' embeds the Lowell persona firmly within the grand narrative of American history, it also displays a particular fascination with the figure of the outsider, the 'Un-American' who diverges from the classic image of the anglicized, Christian pilgrim. Here, the outsider with whom Lowell most closely identifies is his great-great-grandfather, Mordecai Myers; 'a dark man, a German Jew – no downright Yankee'.[32] In this description, Lowell lays claim to his American heritage, citing Mordecai Myers's engagement in the War of 1812, and his evolution into the 'friend and host of worldly men and politicians with Dutch names: De Witt, Clinton, Vanderpoel, Hoes, and Schuyler', while lingering over his German-Jewish ancestry: Mordecai Myers is simultaneously hitched to and detached from the coattails of American history.[33] As Lowell continues to flesh out his portrait, however, he also stresses the *imaginative* essence of his identification with his great-great-grandfather: 'Great-great-Grandfather Mordecai! Poor sheepdog in wolf's clothing! In the anarchy of my adolescent war on my parents, I tried to make him a true wolf, the wandering Jew! *Homo lupus homini*!'[34]

Sexton's first creative delineation of postwar Jewish identity takes place in one of her earliest poems, 'My Friend, My Friend', which was published in *The*

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[32] Robert Lowell, '91 Revere Street', *Life Studies* (1959) (London: Faber and Faber, 2001), p. 12.
[33] Lowell, pp. 12-13.
[34] Lowell, p. 13.

Antioch Review in 1959. Dedicated to her friend and fellow poet Maxine Kumin, 'who hesitates each time she sees a young girl wearing The Cross', 'My Friend, My Friend' unashamedly configures Jewishness as a metonym for victimhood.[35] In an interview with Middlebrook, George Starbuck recollects the strength of Sexton's interest in Kumin's Jewishness: '"I think Maxine felt at times she was some kind of ethnic village or historic exhibit for Anne, the religion student wanting to know 'What's this Jewishness all about? Who's this Yahweh?"'[36] In her biography of Sexton, Middlebrook goes on to speculate that this poem would almost certainly have been circulated in Lowell's poetry class, which was also attended by Starbuck and Plath.[37] Plath's potential exposure to the poem is particularly significant, given her subsequent deployment of Holocaust imagery in 'Little Fugue', 'Lady Lazarus' and, most notoriously, 'Daddy'.[38] As Jacqueline Rose proposes in *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath*, both 'My Friend, My Friend' and 'Daddy', document 'the point at which the abyss at the centre of Jewish identity, for the one who is Jewish and not Jewish, appears in the form of a drama about psychic aggression and guilt'.[39] Beyond speculation about its influence upon Plath's more famous poem, however, 'My Friend, My Friend' has received very little critical attention.

Unusually, 'My Friend, My Friend' is modelled on the villanelle – a fixed poetic form that is contingent upon strict patterns of repetition. Developed and popularized in Europe in the sixteenth century, the villanelle first entered Anglophone poetry in the late nineteenth century. Since this time it has remained a rare mode of

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[35] See Anne Sexton, 'My Friend, My Friend', *The Selected Poems of Anne Sexton*, ed. by Diane Wood Middlebrook and Diana Hume George (Boston; Houghton Mifflin, 1988), p. 5.
[36] Middlebrook, p. 123
[37] Middlebrook, p. 123
[38] See Heather Cam, '"Daddy": Sylvia Plath's Debt to Anne Sexton', *Sexton: Selected Criticism*, ed. by Diana Hume George (Urbana and Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1988), pp. 223-26, Middlebrook, p. 105, and Jacqueline Rose, *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath*, 2nd edn. (London: Virago Press, 1996), pp. 217-18.
[39] Rose, *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath*, p. 217.

poetic expression, marginalized, in part, by the popular shift towards free verse. Ordinarily consisting of five tercets (rhyming *aba*) and a concluding quatrain (rhyming *abaa*), and featuring two rhymes and two refrains, the villanelle presents unique compositional difficulties to the poet writing in English, due to the low number of rhyming words that occur in the language. In 'My Friend, My Friend', the usual formal challenges that the villanelle poses are intensified by the modifications that Sexton makes to its structure and rhyme scheme: instead of five tercets and a quatrain, Sexton's villanelle is comprised of five quatrains (rhyming *aaba*) and a quintrain (*aabaa*), multiplying the number of rhyming words that the poem requires for its form to remain recognizable. Sexton complicates this form yet further by introducing a third refrain.

While many of her early poems make use of complex rhyme schemes, Sexton's recourse to the villanelle in 'My Friend, My Friend' resonates on a number of distinct levels. Firstly, in its rarity, the villanelle complements the strangeness of the poem's subject matter: that is, Sexton chooses an exceptional form within which to imagine the cultural sidelining of Jewish identity. Furthermore, the villanelle's historic migration from Europe to the English-speaking world at once anticipates and replicates the emigration of European Jews to the United States as they fled Nazi persecution. This migration is, of course, further patterned by the movement of information that took place in the aftermath of World War II, or, more specifically, by the way that the Holocaust – an event which took place across mainland Europe – was translated to, and witnessed belatedly by, an English-speaking American public. Finally, given that 'My Friend, My Friend' is a postwar poem about Jewish victimization, Sexton's use of the villanelle, with its rigid schematics, might be read as a nostalgic gesture; an attempt to reinstate the principles of order that the chaotic

violence and extreme brutality of the Second World War had seemed to obliterate. At the same time, however, Sexton's inability to adhere to the villanelle's rhythmic structure suggests the extent to which such an order is unsustainable in the postwar world.

Although 'My Friend, My Friend' is not a poem about the Holocaust in any straightforward sense, Sexton's positioning of the Jew as history's ultimate victim trades conspicuously on the legacy of the European genocide. It is, then, the fact of the Holocaust – albeit unreferenced – that both anchors and validates Sexton's version of Jewish identity:

> Who will forgive me for the things I do?
> With no special legend or God to refer to,
> With my calm white pedigree, my yankee kin,
> I think it would be better to be a Jew.
>
> I forgive you for what you did not do,
> I am impossibly guilty. Unlike you,
> My friend, I can not blame my origin
> With no special legend or God to refer to.

The villanelle's refrains, set out in lines one, two, and four of the opening stanza, immediately raise the questions of guilt, forgiveness and inheritance on which the poem turns. More specifically, however, Sexton's references to 'pedigree', 'kin', and 'origin' situate these questions in relation to issues of race and ethnicity: as the speaker's 'calm white pedigree' and 'yankee kin' render her 'impossibly guilty', so Jewishness is understood as a condition of permanent guiltlessness. While racialized accounts of ethnic identity, with their problematic links to Nazi eugenics, were regarded with scepticism in the years following the Holocaust, 'My Friend, My

Friend' is radically contingent upon the idea that 'Jews are born, not made'.[40] Jewishness, as Sexton constructs it in the poem, is a matter of history and inheritance, not a choice; it is as inescapable as it is unattainable. It is this fact that prohibits the fulfilment of the speaker's Jewish ambitions and renders her lamentations futile.

Watching my mother die I slowly knew
My first release. I wish some ancient bugaboo
Followed me. But my sin is always my sin.
With no special legend or God to refer to.

Who will forgive me for the things I do?
To have your reasonable hurt to belong to
Might ease my trouble like liquor or aspirin.
I think it would be better to be a Jew.

And if I lie, I lie because I love you,
Because I am bothered by the things I do,
Because your hurt invades my calm white skin:
With no special legend or God to refer to,
I think it would be better to be a Jew.

While the Holocaust lends symbolic weight to Sexton's Judaic imagery, the event itself is evoked only indirectly, through the residues it leaves upon the word 'Jew'. Just as the traumatic event is *missed*, the Holocaust is *missed out* of the poem. There is a sense, then, in which Sexton's poem, marked by this evasion at the level of reference, might be read as a post-traumatic response to the Nazi genocide, a compulsive, intrusive, repetitious acting out that makes itself felt in the formal structures of the poem.

In an interview with Amos Goldberg, the trauma theorist Dominick LaCapra usefully refines Freud's definition of 'acting out'. For LaCapra, it is inextricable from 'the tendency to repeat something compulsively'. This is, he states, 'very clear in the case of people who undergo a trauma', who are inclined to 'relive' traumatic

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[40] Middlebrook, p. 123

occurrences 'or at least find that those occurrences intrude on their present existence . . . in flashbacks; or in nightmares; or in words that are compulsively repeated, and that don't seem to have their ordinary meaning, because they're taking on different connotations from another situation, in another place'.[41] LaCapra's identification of 'words . . . compulsively repeated' as a critical symptom of acting out is especially pertinent to a discussion of poetry, and, by extension, to 'My Friend, My Friend', which is structured around the strict repetition of three refrains: 'Who will forgive me for the things I do'; 'With no special legend or God to refer to'; 'I think it would be better to be a Jew'. These refrains, unlike those of other contemporary villanelles, such as Elizabeth Bishop's 'One Art' (1976), remain consistent across the poem's six stanzas. As with LaCapra's 'words . . . compulsively repeated', however, these lines seem strangely dissociated from 'ordinary meaning'. In the first refrain, the speaker's longing for forgiveness is not locatable in terms of a distinct sin: she does not require forgiveness for something she *did*, but for something she *does*. Similarly, her speculation in the third refrain that 'it would be better to be a Jew' operates, as I have already suggested, in relation to a historical referent (the Holocaust) that is never overtly signified. This final, pivotal refrain is charged, in LaCapra's phraseology, with 'connotations from another situation, in another place'. Repetitious, unalterable, and referentially disjunctive, these refrains reflect precisely the characteristics that the French psychologist Pierre Janet ascribed to 'traumatic memory', which is similarly characterized by dissociation, automaticity, and inflexibility.[42]

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[41] Dominick LaCapra, 'An Interview with Professor Dominick LaCapra', Amos Goldberg, Cornell University, June 9, 1998. *Yad Vashem: The Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Authority.* <http://www.yadvashem.org.il/odot_pdf/Microsoft%20Word%20-%203648.pdf>. [Accessed June 10 2006].

[42] Pierre Janet qtd. in Bessel A. van der Kolk and Onno van der Hart, 'The Intrusive Past: The Flexibility of Memory and the Engraving of Trauma', *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, ed. by Cathy Caruth (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), pp. 158-85 (p. 163).

Anticipating Freud's work on trauma, Janet speculated that extraordinary experiences are 'remembered' differently to those which are familiar, quotidian, or expected. Where routine experiences are readily assimilable to the cognitive schemata of 'narrative memory', and thus easily retrievable to consciousness, extraordinary or 'traumatic' experiences are defined by the fact that they are resistant to integration within these same psychic systems and, it follows, to easy narration. The survivor of the traumatic experience is thus 'unable to make the recital which we call narrative memory, and yet they remain confronted by [the] difficult situation'.[43] Unavailable to consciousness and awkwardly inflexible, traumatic memories resurface, in the words of van der Kolk et al, as 'terrifying perceptions, obsessional preoccupations and somatic reexperiences'.[44] The dissociative, obsessional, and somatic mechanisms that Janet ascribes to traumatic memory also seem to be operational within 'My Friend, My Friend', and are, as I have already established, rendered perceptible in the aural effects of the refrain. These mechanisms are similarly discernible in the insistent throb of Sexton's rhymes. Rhyme, after all, is another mode of repetition – and one which in 'My Friend, My Friend' reflects, by way of its schematic fixity, the regular, unremitting pulsation of the speaker's guilt: each articulation of 'do', 'to', 'you', 'knew', and 'bugaboo' works to echo the 'Jew' of the third refrain – a word which is tainted by the historical residues of the Holocaust. Through the apparatus of rhyme, then, Sexton makes persistent, if enigmatic, gestures back towards the figure of the Jew, and thus towards the speaker's desire to be recognized as a victim, to be forever evacuated of the feelings of guilt by which she is plagued. The villanelle's restrictive

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[43] Pierre Janet, *Psychological Healing* (1919), 2 vols (New York: Macmillan, 1925), II, p. 661. *Psychological Healing* was originally published in French as *Les médications psychologiques.*

[44] Bessel A. van der Kolk, James W. Hopper, and Janet E. Osterman, 'Exploring the Nature of Traumatic Memory: Combining Clinical Knowledge with Laboratory Methods,' *Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment and Trauma* (The Haworth Maltreatment and Trauma Press; an imprint of the Haworth Press, Inc, 2001) 4.2, pp. 9-31 (p. 25).

rhyme scheme, coupled with Sexton's deliberate reiteration of particular words or phrases ('But *my sin* is always *my sin*'; 'And if *I lie*, *I lie because I* love you, / *Because I* am bothered by the things *I* do, / *Because* your hurt invades my calm white skin' [emphasis added]), reproduces the obsessive eruptions of traumatic memory at the surface of the text. It also generates a decidedly claustrophobic effect; the reader gets caught up in the poem's textual cycles in a way that mimics the speaker's entanglement in an emotional spiral of sin, guilt, and self-recrimination. While the precise nature of the 'sin' – the source of the speaker's shame – remains enigmatic, it is heavily ethnicized: the speaker's sin is, explicitly, the sin of the non-Jew. In this way, it seems to allude to the climate of bad conscience that plagued non-Jewish communities in the wake of the Holocaust: located in relation to the figure of the Jew and inscribed upon her 'calm white skin', after all, the speaker's guilt is not only ethnicized, but also racialized, calling to mind the spurious notions of racial purity that were used to rationalize the Nazi persecution of Jewish populations.

In 'My Friend, My Friend', as in Janet's 'traumatic memory', the speaker remains 'confronted by [a] difficult situation' (if the Holocaust can be described in such euphemistic terms) which she is prevented from symbolizing directly, logically, or coherently. Overtly structured around cyclical, repetitive patterns of rhyme, 'My Friend, My Friend' is a poem in which the acoustic qualities of the language are eminently foregrounded. As well as a means of signifying, language becomes an outlet for the symptoms of the speaker's post-traumatic psychopathology, and is reconfigured along the lines of traumatic memory: compulsive, inflexible and obscurely detached from its historical referent. Language is thus the site at which the trauma is, in Freud's terms, 'acted-out'.

According to Julia Kristeva, all signifying practice is comprised of two constituents: the symbolic and the semiotic. The first, the symbolic, is described by Kristeva as the layer of discourse 'that adheres to the logical and grammatical rules of speaking'.[45] Conversely, the semiotic is contingent upon 'primary processes whose sensory aspects are often nonverbal (sounds and melody, rhythm, color, odors, and so forth)'.[46] As Elizabeth Grosz summarizes, the Kristevan semiotic is formulated as 'both the precondition of symbolic functioning and its uncontrollable excess'. In the written text, the semiotic might be announced through rhythmic, intonational and repetitive motifs that disrupt 'the norms of the smooth, understandable "readerly" text' and indicate 'transgressive breaches of symbolic coherence [or] the symbolization or representation of hitherto unspeakable or unintelligent phenomena'.[47] In Kristeva's view, poetic language is one of the sites at which these ruptures in 'symbolic coherence' tend to occur, where the sensorial appeal of language is rendered most apparent. Just as Janet identifies 'somatic reexperiences' with the processes of traumatic memory, Kristeva associates the semiotic with rhythms, melodies, and the repetition of sounds that provide stimulation to the vocal and aural apparatus. There is, then, a sense in which the semiotic breaches in 'My Friend, My Friend' might be convergent with what I have already identified as the traumatic breaches in the same poem.[48] By foregrounding the material elements of discursive practice, language is installed as a somatic, as well as a symbolic, process. In this way, the repetitive convulsions of 'My Friend, My Friend' might be read as being consistent with the 'somatic reexperiences' that Janet identifies as a feature of

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[45] Julia Kristeva, *New Maladies of the Soul*, trans. by Ross Guberman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), p. 103.
[46] Kristeva, *New Maladies of the Soul*, p. 104.
[47] Elizabeth Grosz, *Jacques Lacan: A Feminist Introduction* (London: Routledge, 1990), pp. 152-53.
[48] See Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, trans. by Margaret Waller (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), pp. 153-54.

traumatic memory. Through these repetitive manoeuvres, then, guilt comes to function within the 'My Friend, My Friend' as the 'obsessional preoccupation' of Janet's traumatic memory: it simultaneously speaks to and encrypts a traumatic experience that is yet to be fully recuperated by the conscious mind.

As I have already indicated, a number of scholars, including Middlebrook, Rose, and Heather Cam, have cited 'My Friend, My Friend' as a likely source for the Holocaust imagery of Plath's 'Daddy'. Viewing the compositions alongside one another, however, it is quickly apparent that Sexton's influence is not only discernible in Plath's metaphorical appropriation of Jewish identity, but also in the rhymes and rhythms of her writing. As Cam observes in her short essay on 'Daddy', 'Plath borrows Sexton's "do", "you", and "Jew"' and adds to them 'ingenious variants of her own: "shoe", "Achoo", "blue", "du", "true", "through", "who", and "glue"'. In addition, the 'ancient bugaboo' of Sexton's 'My Friend, My Friend' is echoed in Plath's poem by the patriarchal interlocutor's incomprehensible 'gobbledygoo'.[49] Aside from the obvious referential synonymy of these two terms, the iambic stress pattern of 'ancient bugaboo' approximates that of 'your gobbledygoo', with both nonsense words culminating in the protracted vowel diagraph 'oo', which seems to dramatize the point at which language ceases to function as a signifying economy, and is instead reduced to a sequence of appealing, if virtually senseless, sounds.[50] Through the deliberate deployment of words that not only refer to the reduction of language to nonsense, but also, in the exaggerated length of the final syllable ('oo'), work to

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[49] Cam, p. 225.

[50] According to the *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, the term 'bugaboo' denotes 'a fancied object of terror' and 'Loud or empty talk, nonsense, rubbish'. *Gobbledygook*, from which Plath's 'gobbledygoo' derives, is cited as referring to 'official, professional, or pretentious verbiage or jargon'. Both words, therefore, foreground the capacity of language to obscure rather than communicate – a fact that is especially significant in the study of trauma. See *Oxford English Dictionary Online* <http://www.oed.com>. [Accessed October 6 2006].

reproduce this nonsense, Sexton and Plath reveal the fragility of poetic meaning, which is always and already on the verge of breaking down or metamorphosing into something different.

Despite the evident indebtedness of Plath's 'Daddy' to Sexton's 'My Friend, My Friend', the former is far more aggressive in its attempt to anchor Jewish identity to the historical and geographical co-ordinates of the Holocaust. From the outset, Plath's use of the untranslated German word ('Ach, du') works to map out the European topography of the poem, while also establishing the German ancestry of the eponymous patriarch – an ancestry which invigorates the Nazi-Jew metaphor around which 'Daddy' rotates. Even the opening line of the poem – 'You do not do, you do not do' – can be read retroactively, in light of the subsequent 'Ach, du' of the third stanza, as a play on 'du', the German for 'you' – a phonetic coincidence which might testify to the speaker's preoccupation with the male other – the you/du/do of the absent father. It is in the seventh stanza, however, that the landmarks of the Holocaust are most explicitly evoked, as the 'obscene' German tongue becomes

> An engine, an engine
> Chuffing me off like a Jew.
> A Jew to Dachau, Auschwitz, Belsen.
> I began to talk like a Jew.
> I think I may well be a Jew.

Where Sexton's initial use of the Jewish metaphor is intentionally vague in its signals towards the Holocaust, Plath's Jew is projected directly into the heartlands of Nazi-occupied Europe, to the Holocaust's most notorious venues: 'Dachau, Auschwitz, Belsen'. Like the narrator of Berryman's short story, the speaker's imaginary Jewishness becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy: transported 'like a Jew' and beginning to talk 'like a Jew', the speaker reasons that she 'may well be a Jew'. As in

Berryman's tale, simile collapses into metaphor as what it means to be '*like* a Jew becomes indistinguishable from what it means to '*be* a Jew' [emphasis added]. Even so, as the poem progresses, the speaker appears to stage a retreat from this metaphor. Her alignment to the figure of the Jew becomes increasingly tentative, culminating in the conditional assertion that 'I may be a bit of a Jew'. All the while, however, the father-interlocutor is hewn into an intimidating model of Nazi authority:

> I have always been scared of *you*,
> With your Luftwaffe, your gobbledygoo.
> And your neat mustache
> And your Aryan eye, bright blue.
> Panzer-man, panzer-man, O You –
>
> Not God but a swastika
> So black no sky could squeak through.
> Every woman adores a Fascist,
> The boot in the face, the brute
> Brute heart of a brute like you.

As Plath's Jew is riveted to the sites of the Holocaust, so the father-fascist is envisioned as a disturbing composite of Third Reich motifs: the Luftwaffe, the Aryan eye, the swastika.[51] Plath's attempt to 'blacken' the character of the absent patriarch is further encoded in her near-monochromatic rendering of him. He is the stifling 'black shoe' of the first stanza, the 'black man' who bites her 'pretty red heart in two', the 'man in black with a Meinkampf look', and the conquered 'Daddy' of the closing lines, lying prostrate with a stake in his 'fat black heart'. The shadowy presence of the father is, however, insistent and suffocating. Cast as the devilish 'man in black', he is called to mind with each of Plath's references to his signature colour and, moreover,

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[51] Interestingly, Plath's interpellation of the father-muse using the term 'Panzer-man' pre-empts the use of the same designation by Sexton in a poem entitled 'The Wedlock', which was published posthumously in *45 Mercy Street*, the relevant lines from which are quoted here: 'My breast waited / shy as a clam / until you came, / Mr. Firecracker, / Mr. Panzer-man'. See Anne Sexton, 'The Wedlock', *45 Mercy Street* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1975), pp. 50-51.

with each of her stuttering 'black' rhymes: that is, in 'my Taroc pack and my Taroc pack', 'back, back, back', 'sack' and 'rack'.

While this system of black imagery is developed to the fullest extent in 'Daddy', the seeds of its inception are traceable to 'Little Fugue', written six months earlier in April of 1962. Another chronicle of the father-daughter relationship refracted through the prism of recent European history, 'Little Fugue' engages a similar set of symbols to 'Daddy'. As in the latter poem, the speaker's excavation of her own personal history, and her recognition of its ultimate irretrievability to conscious thought, is implicated in a broader attempt to understand and come to terms with the violences of the twentieth century, to which she did not bear witness.

The title of Plath's poem is conspicuously patterned on that of Paul Celan's 1948 poem, 'Death Fugue'.[52] Written only a few years after the Nazi occupation of Romania, during which Celan was conscripted to forced labour before his release in 1944, 'Death Fugue' provides a rough template for the system of imagery that Plath develops in 'Little Fugue': references to the Aryan features of Celan's Jewish commandant are pitched alongside descriptions of his casual perpetration of extreme violence: 'he grabs for the rod in his belt he swings it his eyes are blue / jab your spades deeper you lot there you others play on for the dancing', and later, 'this Death is ein Mesiter aus Deutschland his eye it is blue / he shoots you with shot made of lead shoots you level and true'. Similarly, in 'Little Fugue', Plath's speaker claims to 'remember a blue eye' – the blue eye, that is, of an equally authoritarian Nazi-father.

The 'fugue' of Plath's title denotes, in its traditional usage, a type of composition that originated in Europe during the seventeenth century. Identifiable by

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[52] Paul Celan, 'Death Fugue', *Against Forgetting: Twentieth-Century Poetry of Witness*, ed. by Carolyn Forché (New York and London: W. W. Norton and Company, 1993), pp. 380-82.

its contrapuntal arrangement – according to which separate musical lines are sounded simultaneously – the development and popularization of the fugue is generally accredited to German composers Bach and Beethoven. With its European ancestry, the history of the fugue parallels that of the villanelle – the poetic form to which Sexton takes recourse in 'My Friend, My Friend'. Thus embedded in the structures of German culture, 'Little Fugue' advertises itself, however misleadingly, as a modest response to the 'big noises' of Beethoven's 'Grosse Fuge', which, in the course of the poem, evokes the commanding oratorical tenor of the European tyrant. Furthermore, as the fugal arrangement is necessarily defined by delay – the delay, that is, which occurs between the first sounding of a musical phrase and the belated, imitative recitation of this same phrase by a second 'voice' – Plath's title usefully thematizes the temporal fracture with which 'Little Fugue' is concerned. Here, after all, the speaker is *too late* to forge any meaningful connection with the dead father, and can only attempt to console herself with a discomfiting collage of abstract-surrealist memories: 'a blue eye, / a briefcase of tangerines. / This was a man, then!' The significance of Plath's title does not, however, end here: 'fugue', derived from the Latin verb *fugere* meaning 'to flee', is also a psychiatric term used by Pierre Janet to describe a dissociative condition in which the individual's normal sense of identity is breached. More specifically, the fugue state is characterized by the individual's sudden flight from his or her home or place of work to 'some unconsciously desired locality', a loss of autobiographical memory, and the immediate repression of any recollection related to the fugue episode itself. [53] As Janet explains – albeit somewhat

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[53] The definition of 'dissociative fugue' offered by the *American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* is as follows: 'The essential feature of Dissociative Fugue is sudden, unexpected, travel away from one's customary place of daily activities, with inability to recall some or all of one's past'. See the *American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (Washington, D. C.: American Psychiatric Association, 1994), p. 481.

enigmatically – 'fugue' refers to 'those strange excursions, accomplished automatically, of which the patient has not the least recollection'.[54] There is, perhaps, a sense in which 'Little Fugue' might be productively reconsidered alongside this conceptualization of the dissociative fugue, defined as it is by the synchronic processes of fleeing and forgetting. Certainly, Plath's poem details the speaker's imaginative flight to the 'unconsciously desired locality' of the dead father's Germanic homeland and, by extension, to the site of the father himself. This flight, moreover, is undertaken as part of the speaker's attempt to mitigate against a forgetting that has already taken place, to correct the fact that she is 'lame in the memory'.

In this context of loss and amnesia, Plath's use of black imagery works both to imply the tyrannical cast of the father and to hint at the depths of his inscrutability, which is reflected back in the blank 'featurelessness' of the speaker's world.

> The yew's black fingers wag;
> Cold clouds go over.
> So the deaf and dumb
> Signal the blind, and are ignored.
>
> I like black statements.
> The featurelessness of that cloud, now!
> White as an eye all over!

As Rose has already observed, Plath's use of the yew tree in 'Little Fugue' is heavily informed by Robert Graves's analysis of its poetic-mythological roots in *The White Goddess*. In this seminal work, Graves traces the symbolic lineage of the yew back to its position within the Celtic 'tree alphabet', in which each character takes the name

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[54] See Pierre Janet, *The Mental State of Hystericals: A Study of Mental Stigmata and Mental Accidents* trans. by Caroline Rollin Corson (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1901), p. 422.

of 'the tree or shrub of which it is the initial'[55]. In this alphabet, the yew corresponds to the fifth vowel – the letter 'Idho', or 'I' – which is associated, in Druidic lore, with the little (or 'auricular') finger, the agency of oracular power.[56] One of 'The Five Magical Trees of Ireland', Graves identifies the yew as the 'death-tree', and defines its corollary 'I' as the 'death letter': in Celtic mythology, he states, it is 'Idho the Yew of Death' that makes 'the wheel of existence come full circle'[57]. According to this complex formulation, then, the 'I' is always and already embedded within the phonetic structure of yew/you. As the father, the inferred interlocutor of the poem, is identified with the yew tree – the phonetic correlate of the 'you' by which he is addressed – so the speaker is identified with the yew/you of the father, as a result of the yew's poetic-mythological correspondence to the letter 'I', by which the speaker herself is designated. Staging a crisis of identity that plays out at the level of the pronoun, Plath gestures back towards the dissociative fugue and its disruption of the individual's sense of stable and coherent selfhood. The 'I' and the 'you' no longer function to signify discretely-sited subject positions, but only to remind the reader of the extent to which personal identity – or the conceit of personal identity – is contingent upon the figure of the other, and the dynamics of the self's interaction with this other.

From the impotent wagging of the 'yew's black fingers' in the opening stanza to the recurrent references to visual impairment, deafness and silence, 'Little Fugue' works to dramatize the impossibility of the speaker's desired dialogue with her father. This is formatively encoded in the dumb show imagery of the first few lines, in which the mute gestures of the speechless yew fall redundantly before the 'blind' eyes of the

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[55] Robert Graves, *The White Goddess: A Historical Grammar of Poetic Myth* (1948), amended and enlarged edn. (New York: Noonday Press, 1966), p. 165.
[56] According to Graves, the 'I' is the fifth vowel in the Celtic tree alphabet. See Graves, p. 193-96.
[57] Graves, pp. 193-96.

speaker. The theme of impeded vision is central to 'Little Fugue', and is alluded to in the speaker's description of the featureless cloud, which is 'White as an eye all over!' Phonetically, the appalling whiteness of the eye implies the whiteness, or 'featurelessness' of the 'I' of the speaker, an 'I' which has been left blank, incomplete, in the wake of the father's removal. Despite various impediments to optical clarity, however, the speaker is able to 'see' her father's voice

> Black and leafy, as in my childhood,
>
> A yew hedge of orders,
> Gothic and barbarous, pure German.
> Dead men cry from it.
> I am guilty of nothing.

In the disorientating, synesthetic haze of the poem, the *I*/eye of the speaker does 'see' something, but it is something which is not, by definition, available to sight. Rose has, in her analysis of 'Little Fugue', questioned whether or not to 'see a voice' is to 'be deaf to it? – not in the sense of hearing nothing, but of hearing, of seeing too much'.[58] The ambiguity to which Rose here draws attention is crucial to the project of reading 'Little Fugue' in light of trauma theory. What Rose is suggesting, after all, is that the speaker, being overwhelmed by the force of the father's voice, has been unable to assimilate it to consciousness. Hearing or seeing 'too much' or too violently, the speaker 'misses' her father in the same way that one might miss the traumatic event, re-experiencing him belatedly, fleetingly, and synesthetically as an abstract composite of memory fragments. Configured as a 'yew hedge of orders', after all, the father is 'remembered' primarily as a voice – a voice whose 'orders' the speaker is unable to decode. In this characterization, Plath draws on the deadly auspices of the yew to fuse

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[58] Rose, *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath*, p. 219.

the father to the brutal figure of the fascist, whose 'orders, / Gothic and barbarous, pure German', are tethered to the cries of the 'dead men' that emanate 'from' the foliage. As in 'Daddy', the speaker's personal loss is cast into the terms of historical trauma. In this instance, Plath's references to the language, geography, and culture of Germany, and the 'barbarous' orders of the father-yew, gesture towards the spatially and temporally distant events of World War I, while necessarily trading on the reader's memory of more recent atrocities in Europe. The speaker's history, then, is a history of violences that she cannot remember. Despite being implicated in these violences, as a result of her patrilineal genealogy, the speaker is quick to defend her innocence, proclaiming that she is 'guilty of nothing'. For Rose, this line 'stages a crisis in the historical location of guilt', working simultaneously 'as denial and as plaint'.[59] The enunciative source of this statement is deliberately obscured: the statement itself 'can be read back retroactively into the cries of the dead men heard in the voice of the father, into – as a consequence – the father's own voice, or into the voice of the speaker herself'.[60] In addition, I would suggest that Plath's attempt to complicate the distribution of guilt in 'Little Fugue' is inscribed into the syntactical arrangement of the line, in which a statement of guilt ('I am guilty') is immediately displaced by a corrective negation ('of nothing'). With the problematic inextricability of guilt and innocence thus established, the speaker speculatively equates the trials of the tyrannical patriarch to those of the martyred Christ: 'The yew my Christ, then. / Is it not as tortured?' In this way, the father vacillates between the positions of torturer and victim, between the poles of guilt and innocence.

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[59] Rose, *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath*, p. 220.
[60] Rose, *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath*, p. 220.

Interestingly, Plath's alignment of the figure of the tyrant to this 'yew hedge of orders' pre-empts Lowell's poem 'Stalin', written in 1973, in which the Soviet dictator is yoked to 'a hedge of vines and bushes', which 'fall short of black'.[61] The poem, in its entirety, reads as follows:

> Winds on the stems make them creak like things of man;
> a hedge of vines and bushes – three or four
> kinds, grape-leaf, elephant-ear and alder,
> an arabesque, imperfect and alive,
> a hundred hues of green, the darkest shades
> fall short of black, the whitest leaf-back short of white.
> The state, if we could see behind the wall,
> is woven of perishable vegetation.
> Stalin? What shot him clawing up the tree of power –
> millions plowed under with the crops they grew,
> his intimates dying like the spider-bridegroom?
> The large stomach could only chew success. What raised him
> was an unusual lust to break the icon,
> joke cruelly, seriously, and be himself.

Spun from references to nature, colour, and twentieth-century politics, Lowell's tyrant emerges out of the same poetic vocabulary as the fascistic patriarchs of Plath's 'Little Fugue' and 'Daddy'. As in 'Little Fugue', the tree imagery in Lowell's poem is heavily informed by historical myth. Stalin is linked to not one, but 'three or four / kinds' of 'vines and bushes'. As well as the 'elephant-ear' and the 'grape-leaf', Lowell mentions the alder tree, which Graves discusses at length in *The White Goddess* – one of Plath's sources for 'Little Fugue'. According to Graves, the alder is associated with the Celtic warrior-god Bran, or *ocur vran* ('Bran the Malign'), whose name derives from the Latin 'Orcus', the word for the Roman God of the Dead and the punisher of broken oaths.[62] Like Stalin, then, Bran is inexorably identified with

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[61] Robert Lowell, 'Stalin', *The Collected Poems of Robert Lowell*, ed. by Frank Bidart and David Gewanter (London: Faber and Faber, 2002), p. 912.
[62] Graves, p. 76.

conflict, slaughter, and judgement, and his tree, the alder, with prowess in battle: it is described explicitly in the Irish *Song of the Forest Trees* as 'the . . . tree that is hottest in the fight'.[63] Similarly, as Bran's death augured in an era of famine, during which the harvests in Britain failed and the land became barren, so Stalin's reign played host to a period of extreme privation in which, as Lowell renders it, 'millions plowed under with the crops they grew'. The alder's mythic links to mortal destruction are further compounded by its physical properties: after felling, the white flesh of the alder appears to 'bleed' a crimson sap, which causes it to resemble the wounded human body.[64] It is in light of this uncanny feature that the alder is considered sacred.

Like Plath in 'Little Fugue' and 'Daddy', Lowell is ambivalent about the figure of the fascist. Twinned to an 'imperfect' 'hedge of vines and bushes', Lowell's Stalin is not thoroughly corrupt, but nor is he benevolent or blameless; as with the hedge, his 'darkest shades / fall short of black', just as 'the whitest leaf-back' is 'short of white'. Stalin's humour and his heartlessness are shown to dwell side by side, as the speaker describes his tendency to 'joke cruelly, seriously, and be himself'.

As Lowell draws on Plath's distinctive Nazi imagery in his creative rendering of Stalin, so Sexton's deployment of Holocaust symbolism in the latter phases of her career displays an equally overt indebtedness to her former colleague. Seizing its title from the office telephone number of Sexton's therapist of over seven years, Dr. Orne – who, at the time of the poem's composition, was about to move from Boston to Philadelphia – 'KE 6-8018' is a poem about an impossible, but much fantasized, dialogue with a distant, and resistant, interlocutor. Dated January 1964 and collected in 1966's Pulitzer Prize-winning *Live or Die*, the poem is addressed to an enigmatic

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[63] From the *Song of the Forest Trees*, reproduced in Graves, p. 169.
[64] Graves, p.171.

'Black lady' who is variously and discordantly described as 'a sweetener, a drawer of blood . . . / a hot voice, an imminence and then a death'. As in 'Daddy' and 'Little Fugue', the voice becomes a synecdoche for the figure of authority or, more specifically, for the figure of authority who does not speak. Slippery, remote, and shackled to images of blood and death, Sexton's interlocutor is, essentially, a reconstructed version of Plath's paternal 'black man'. Like Plath's paternal despot, Sexton's female addressee urges, through her posture of mute neglect, the speaker's anticipatory identification with the forsaken figure of the Jew.

> I will call for the boy-child I never had.
> I will call like the Jew at the gate.
> I will dial the wound over and over
> and you will not yield
> and there will be nothing,
> black lady, nothing,
> although I will wait,
> unleashed and unheard.

Derived, most probably, from Plath's symbol of the black telephone in 'Daddy', which is torn 'off at the root' – precluding, rather than assisting, the possibility of communication – the unanswered calls of 'KE 6-8018' work to metaphorize the speaker's abject sense of disempowerment.[65] Into this drama of desperation and desertion, Sexton inserts the figure of 'the Jew at the gate'; an embodiment, in the wake of World War II, of historical abandonment. As in 'My Friend, My Friend' however, the speaker is prevented from laying full claim to the epithet 'Jew': where she 'will call for the boy-child [she] never had' and 'will dial the wound over and over', she will only 'call *like* the Jew at the gate'. As one of three similes in a poem that is otherwise comprised entirely of metaphors, this strategic circumvention is

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[65] Middlebrook, p. 217.

pronounced, reflecting the acuteness of post-Holocaust anxieties about the artistic currency of Jewish identity and its fitness for allegorical reworking. These tensions persist throughout the remainder of the poem, and are rendered emphatic in the displacement of the Judaic referent by the image of the open 'wound', to which the speaker is always trying to gain access – a wound which, in its textual proximity to the term 'Jew', encodes the trauma of abandonment (albeit one that is yet to occur) and gestures, again indirectly, towards the Holocaust's resistance to collective, psychological systematization.

In a slightly earlier poem from the same collection – the frequently anthologized 'Flee On Your Donkey' – Sexton's speaker hitches herself firmly to the coattails of the persecuted Jew, but does so while studiously sidestepping conventional designations of Jewishness. Avoiding recourse to the Jewish signifier, then, the speaker describes her younger self to the doctor-interlocutor as 'your third-grader / with a blue star on my forehead'. Unlike the vaguely defined Jewishness to which Sexton refers in 'My Friend, My Friend' and 'KE 6-8018', then, the Jewishness in 'Flee On Your Donkey' is more clearly situated in relation to the events of the Holocaust. The Star of David was, after all, the symbol that facilitated the Nazi ghettoization of the European Jewry – the badge which Jews were required to wear and by which they were, eventually, consigned to death. Flecked by these historical residues, the 'blue star' that is projected onto the speaker's forehead is not only a means of signposting her psychic marginalization, but also, more compellingly, a way of describing the way that historical trauma – even that which is not experienced directly – inscribes itself upon the memory of the subject.

8. Breaking Form: Sexton's 'Awkward Poetics'

Following a conversation about 'Flee On Your Donkey' with Lowell, in which he responded to the poem's stylistic irregularities by advising that it 'ought to be a short story', Sexton observed to Dr. Orne that her former tutor had missed the point of her poem, which was, she claimed, to develop a more 'unconscious', less orderly, form of poetry: 'You have to be more daring. . . . I don't want to be just a poet, writing essence of poetry. I want more content, story, more of the stamp of the individual. . . . There's truth, a story in "Flee On Your Donkey" . . . This poem is all about my acting out: I'm reliving what happened'.[66] Interestingly, then, Sexton's 'acting out' of private trauma occurs as part of a performance of Jewish identity, with its obvious links to the collective trauma of the Holocaust: in this way, 'Flee On Your Donkey' dramatizes the increasing convergence of personal and political life within the postwar American imaginary. Sexton's 'acting out' is, however, demonstrated most forcefully through her abandonment of traditional form in pursuit of an 'unconscious' poetics – a poetics, that is, which attempts to inscribe the procedures of acting out at the level of the text. If, as Sexton once commented, 'every poem is an attempt . . . to master those things which aren't quite mastered', it seems significant that her break with stylistic convention should take place in a poem which not only refers to the disorderliness of the speaker's psychic condition, but does so, in part, through the referential prism of the classic 'unmasterable' event: the Holocaust.[67] As Vogler has argued, the subject matter of a poem is not, and can never be, 'identical with a specific historical event; it is rather the idea of the event, and an idea that evokes the

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[66] Sexton qtd. in Middlebrook, p. 181.
[67] Sexton qtd. in Middlebrook, p. 180.

magnitude of the event through an inability to encompass it fully. In this case, the limitations of lyric poetry as history or description lead to a failure that can succeed, by showing that the enormity of its referent exceeds its grasp'.[68] While the disruption of formal poetics is a common creative response to collective traumas such as the Holocaust, the endeavour to mediate the post-traumatic unconscious is, necessarily, an exercise in control rather than release. '[P]oetic structure . . . is not', Vogler asserts, 'something that happens to the poet, like getting run over by an experience. The "breaking of form" is not evidence of a loss of control, but of an exercise of control designed to produce particular effects'.[69]

In 'After Auschwitz', published posthumously in 1975 in *The Awful Rowing Toward God*, Sexton approaches the Holocaust with a new and disconcerting candour – a candour which, I would argue, only becomes viable *after* Plath's more controversial attempts to aestheticize the Nazi atrocities in the early 1960s. Crucially, Sexton's choice of title, 'After Auschwitz', echoes Theodor Adorno's famous statement, made in 1949, that 'To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric'.[70] In Adorno's analysis, Auschwitz is construed as a site of historical fracture at which conventional modes of interpretation and representation necessarily stall. Not only are these modes inadequate to the task of memorializing the suffering and cruelty that took place within the fences of Auschwitz and its sister camps, but for Adorno they are also concomitant with the 'logic' of 'bourgeois subjectivity'[71] that he identifies as the precondition for the development and execution of the Final Solution; a logic, that

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[68] Thomas A. Vogler, 'Poetic Witness: Writing the Real', *Witness and Memory: The Discourse of Trauma*, ed. by Ana Douglass and Thomas A. Vogler (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 173-206 (p. 183).
[69] Vogler, p. 196.
[70] Theodor Adorno, 'Cultural Criticism and Society', *Can One Live After Auschwitz?: A Philosophical Reader*, ed. by Rolf Tiedemann and trans. by Rodney Livingstone and Others (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2003), pp. 146-62 (p. 162).
[71] Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* (1973), trans. by E. B. Ashton (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 363.

is, of 'coldness', of withdrawal, of 'pure inwardness', and, most pertinently, of a learned indifference to the distress of others.[72] While in his late publications, such as *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno sought to revise his early theories about the impossibility of art after Auschwitz, he maintained that the Holocaust had forever altered the structures and procedures of cultural praxis, as well as transforming the terms of existence itself:

> Perennial suffering has as much right to expression as a tortured man has to scream; hence it may have been wrong to say that after Auschwitz you could no longer write poems. But it is not wrong to raise the less cultural question whether after Auschwitz you can go on living – especially whether one who escaped by accident, one who by rights should have been killed may go on living. His mere survival calls for the coldness, the basic principle of bourgeois subjectivity, without which there could have been no Auschwitz; this is the drastic guilt of him who was spared.[73]

If, in order to 'go on living' after Auschwitz, we must operate in accordance with an ethic of 'coldness', in which we are fundamentally alienated from ourselves and our species being, then any poetry that is produced out of this climate of hardened disengagement will inevitably do a further injustice to the victims and the survivors of the Holocaust. As Adorno contends, however, art does retain some functionality within the post-Holocaust world:

> The concept of a resurrection of culture after Auschwitz is illusory and senseless, and for that reason every work of art that does come into being is forced to pay a bitter price. But because the world has outlived its own demise it needs art as its unconscious chronicle.[74]

As Adorno here identifies the role of Auschwitz in arresting and/or invalidating conventional forms of cultural production, so Sexton – by entitling her poem 'After

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[72] Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia* (London: Verso, 1974), p. 43.
[73] Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, pp. 362-63.
[74] Theodor Adorno qtd. in Flanzbaum, *Can One Live After Auschwitz?*, p. xvi

Auschwitz' – insists upon the radical discontinuity of life before and after the Holocaust. While she might subscribe to Adorno's conceptualization of the Holocaust as an historical moment after which nothing can be the same, Sexton simultaneously works against his attempt to negate or circumscribe the function of poetry within the post-Auschwitz world. To write poetry in the wake of an international atrocity is not, for Sexton, 'barbaric', but a way of negotiating a movement towards an understanding about the extremes of human experience – albeit an understanding that is always and already foreclosed to the outsider. Even so, the poems that come 'after Auschwitz' should, as Adorno contends, work to register the *impact* of Nazi barbarism upon inherited forms of cultural expression, whether thematically, formally, or through recourse to sceptical or self-reflexive strategies of composition.[75]

For Lawrence L. Langer, 'the problem of converting the murder of the European Jewry into poetic vision' represents an explicitly formalist quandary, and involves 'nothing less than finding a form for chaos by including chaos as part of the form'.[76] Likewise, Vogler, paraphrasing Carolyn Forché – a principal advocate for 'witness poetry' – casts the dilemma facing the post-Holocaust poet into equally formalist terms: 'the *form* of the poem is an indexical sign of the poet's mental state, and the "broken" state of the poet's mind is a sign of real "conditions of extremity", responding to a force outside itself. "The narrative of trauma is itself traumatized, and bears witness to extremity by its inability to articulate directly or completely"'.[77] As Antony Rowland argues in *Holocaust Poetry*, the Holocaust precipitates a demand for the development of an 'awkward poetics' that might begin to highlight 'the specific

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[75] According to Adorno, 'All post-Auschwitz culture, including its urgent critique, is garbage'. See Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, p. 367.
[76] Lawrence L. Langer, *Art from the Ashes: A Holocaust Anthology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 553.
[77] Vogler, p. 195. See also Forché, pp. 29-47.

difficulties of engaging with an event so resistant to artistic representation'.[78] According to Rowland, such a poetics would be distinguished, to some extent, by 'suspicion', the suspicion, that is, of the poet who is attentive to the ethical quandaries that arise from attempts to aestheticize the Holocaust. Aside from 'suspicion', Rowland cites the following criteria in his 'taxonomy of awkward poetics':

> metrical tension, the anti-elegiac, self-questioning, embarrassed rhetoric, anti-rhetoric, juxtaposition, incongruity, self-declared inadequacies, paradox, minimalism, non-catharsis, heightened tone, hermeneutics, the anti-redemptive, archaisms, anti-objectivism and 'stylistic eccentricities'.[79]

Rowland's identification of 'these (anti-) poetic qualities', which work to draw attention to 'the impossible necessity of representing the Holocaust', constitutes an attempt to examine the non-referential lineaments of post-Holocaust texts; to take into account, moreover, the *structural* impact of the Holocaust by examining the various ways in which it has disturbed and transformed formal strategies of composition.[80]

For Sexton, as for Rowland, the 'impossible necessity of representing the Holocaust' is tethered inexorably to the cultivation of a poetic self-consciousness or awkwardness that might 'call attention to the difficulties for post-Holocaust writers in trying to gain access to the historical reality of the Holocaust, rather than chasing the chimera of a purely objective response to the events in Europe.[81] In Sexton's poetry, the Holocaust is either addressed through fixed, and often complex, metrical forms, which strike a deliberately discomfiting distance between the poet and the war (as demonstrated by her use of the villanelle in 'My Friend, My Friend'), or, alternatively, through the fractured, discordant structures of free verse, in which she

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[78] Rowland, pp. 10-11.
[79] Rowland, p. 12.
[80] Rowland, p. 12.
[81] Rowland, p. 16.

tries to evoke the profound incomprehensibility of what happened in the Nazi extermination camps. It is this latter strategy that Sexton adopts in 'After Auschwitz':

> Anger,
> as black as a hook,
> overtakes me.
> Each day,
> each Nazi
> took, at 8:00 A.M., a baby
> and sautéed him for breakfast
> in his frying pan.

This opening line, comprised solely of the word 'Anger', immediately echoes the 'After Auschwitz' of the title, both in its syllabic stress and, more obviously, in its imitative alliteration. Strategically anchored to the concept of Auschwitz – which functions within the poem as a metonym for the Holocaust – and formally isolated in a line of its own, 'Anger' is thus installed as the only possible response to a world in which the Nazi extermination camps were able to operate. '[A]s black as a hook', moreover, this anger hardens into the shape of the swastika – a symbol which is, in the popular Western imaginary, inextricable from the unconscionable machinations of the Nazi Party and its merciless execution of the Final Solution. By thus reifying the anger that arises in response to Auschwitz, Sexton implies its dangerous proximity to that which precipitated and fuelled the Nazi genocide itself; it is an anger, after all, which 'overtakes' the speaker – dark, primitive, unchecked. As Sexton's rendering of post-Holocaust anger relies on a stylized use of the colour black that recalls the dark imagery of 'Daddy', so her deliberate evocation of the swastika's black hook provides further evidence of her close engagement with Plath's earlier poem, in which this potent symbol is similarly deployed: 'Panzer-man, panzer-man, O You – // Not God but a swastika / So black no sky could squeak through'. As these lines demonstrate,

Plath views the Holocaust as confounding the concept of the divine – a concern by which 'After Auschwitz' is also striated. The same is also true, to some extent, of 'After Auschwitz'. While Plath's God is dramatically eclipsed by the ominous symbol of the swastika, however, the personified 'death' of Sexton's poem is simply indifferent to the throes of human suffering. Recalling the 'Death' of Celan's 'Death Fugue' – 'a master from Deutschland' – Sexton's 'death' is a consistent, if removed, presence within the poem. A witness to the atrocities at Auschwitz, he looks on passively 'with a casual eye / and picks at the dirt under his fingernail'. As the structure of 'After Auschwitz' is locatable in relation to the economic lyricism and dislocated imagery of modernist *vers libre*, so Sexton's 'death' exudes a sense of resignation that is distinctly modernist: his casual indifference suggests that even the most heinous crimes against humanity and the most abject of human misery are not exceptional, but timeless and banal. In the context of the post-Holocaust poem, then, external agencies of control – whether God or Death – are shown to be impotent in the face of human evil, unable or unwilling to circumscribe its cruel excesses.

As I indicated earlier, 'After Auschwitz' speaks to the problem of formulating the Holocaust within a traditional poetic grammar, and moves instead towards the development of an 'awkward poetics' that acknowledges and foregrounds the Holocaust's vexation of conventional representational strategies. This shift is registered in the opening stanza through Sexton's deliberate eschewal of rhyme. Through this gesture of avoidance, Sexton not only diminishes the status of the poem as a cohesive unit, but also signposts the fundamental resistance of her subject matter to poetic aestheticization. Additionally, she works with clipped, monosyllabic diction, which, in its abruptness and economy, recalls – and risks replicating – the grim, mechanized efficiency with which the Nazis dispatched their victims. The poem's

awkward enjambment also militates against any sense of order that this diction might generate – coherent phrasal units are repeatedly shattered into crooked, dispersed fragments. As a result of these subtle adjustments to the poem's diction and enjambment, as well as Sexton's use of parentheses and syntactical inversions, the opening stanza of 'After Auschwitz', which deals explicitly with imagined acts of Nazi brutality, is possessed of an odd, stuttering quality. Through this stutter, Sexton usefully records the difficulty of finding a vocabulary that is appropriate to the conveyance of such unwieldy subject matter: 'Each day, / each Nazi / took, at 8:00 A.M., a baby / and sautéed him for breakfast / in his frying pan'. Fractured by line breaks and frequent punctuation, the first three of the quoted lines find the speaker faltering, delaying her disclosure of the final, terrible revelation, which seems, when it comes, comparatively rushed.

In *At Memory's Edge: After-Images of the Holocaust in Contemporary Art and Architecture*, Young contends that 'the Holocaust, unlike World War I, has resulted in no new literary forms, no startling artistic breakthroughs; for all intents and purposes, it has been assimilated to many of the modernist innovations already generated by the perceived rupture in culture occasioned by the Great War'.[82] While Young is correct to identify the considerable debt that post-Holocaust writers owe to modernist strategies of representation – which, for the most part, aim to reflect the social, political, and psychological upheavals of the early twentieth century (and particularly the seismic 'shock' of the First World War) through the fragmentation of conventional literary forms – his statement draws attention away from the ways in which the scope of modernist praxis is modified and extended by the specific

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[82] James E. Young, *At Memory's Edge: After-Images of the Holocaust in Contemporary Art and Architecture* (New Haven: Harvard University Press, 2000), p. 5.

demands of post-Holocaust literature. Given that the emergence of post-Holocaust writing has been broadly coincident with the development of 'alternative' critical perspectives – such as those informed by feminist, racial, and ethnic concerns – and the attendant rediscovery of literary texts that were previously ignored, sidelined or suppressed, it is perhaps unsurprising that much of this writing is marked by a peculiar sensitivity to the threat of historical erasure and the processes by which certain voices are silenced within, or locked out of, mainstream discourses. All textual inscription is, after all, the record of winners: the powerful survive on the page while the defeated are lost to the world of representation. For a number of postwar poets, this problem of erasure, of what is excised from a text, became especially pressing in the wake of the genocide at Auschwitz and Hiroshima, where the sheer scale of the destruction seemed to foreclose the possibility of 'direct' witnessing. As Primo Levi writes in *The Drowned and the Saved*:

> I must repeat: we, the survivors, are not the true witnesses. This is an uncomfortable notion of which I have become conscious little by little, reading the memoirs of others and reading mine at a distance of years. We survivors are not only an exiguous but also an anomalous minority: we are those who by their prevarications or abilities or good luck did not touch bottom. Those who did so, those who saw the Gorgon, have not returned to tell about it, or returned mute, but they are the 'Muslims', the submerged, the complete witnesses, the ones whose deposition would have a general significance. They are the rule. We are the exception.[83]

Even for those who wish to lay claim to textual space on behalf of the silent or under-represented, the task is not a straightforward one. As Young asks, how is the post-Holocaust writer or artist 'supposed to remember events they never experienced directly'?[84] What, moreover, constitutes an appropriate, ethical response to an atrocity

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[83] Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved* (New York: Vintage, 1989), pp. 115-16.
[84] Young, *At Memory's Edge*, p. 1.

which one has only 'witnessed' partially, remotely, and belatedly? As I argued earlier, for many writers the only appropriate response to the Holocaust has been silence – a silence that stands for a refusal to generate art from the real stuff of human suffering. In 'After Auschwitz', Sexton works to articulate the fractional, defective character of post-Holocaust poetry through fault lines in the structural complexion of the poem – the metrical breaks and interruptions to which I have already drawn attention. Of similar significance, however, is Sexton's particular utilization of textual space in the poem. Compared to the other poems in *The Awful Rowing Toward God*, as well as her earlier poetry (which tends to display its strong, formal coherence through the visible solidity of its structures), 'After Auschwitz' has a slight, minimalist appearance: the lines are brief, the words are short, and the stanzas break off at irregular, but frequent, intervals.

Man is evil,
I say aloud.
Man is a flower
that should be burnt,
I say aloud.
Man
is a bird full of mud,
I say aloud.

And death looks on with a casual eye
and scratches his anus.

Man with his small pink toes,
with his miraculous fingers
is not a temple
but an outhouse,
I say aloud.
Let man never again raise his teacup.
Let man never again write a book.
Let man never again put on his shoe.
Let man never again raise his eyes,
on a soft July night.
Never. Never. Never. Never. Never.
I say these things aloud.

I beg the Lord not to hear.

'After Auschwitz', then, advertises its own, inevitable inadequacy by preserving an area of silence around the poem itself – a silence which is communicated through the visual metaphor of uninscribed page space. In this rare privileging of blankness over text, Sexton forces the reader to consider the significance of the empty expanse. In this way, the whiteness that surrounds the text of the poem comes to suggest itself as a 'direct expression of the inexpressible'[85]; a 'visible absence' that substitutes for everything that the poet does not know, cannot know, or is incapable of articulating.[86]

With the exception of the first stanza, in which the speaker imagines the singular violences of the Holocaust, 'After Auschwitz' is organized around repetition – and, more specifically, the repetition of the refrain 'I say aloud'. By punctuating each of the speaker's judgements about humanity – or 'Man', as it is in the poem – with this line, Sexton insistently underscores the necessity of *speaking out* in the wake of catastrophe as a way – and possibly the only way – of militating against the inexorable forces of historical erasure. The poem, after all, as Forché has suggested, 'might be our only evidence that an event has occurred: it exists for us as the sole trace of an occurrence'.[87] Still, as Forché is eager to note, such a characterization is itself problematic:

> To talk about the poem as the sole trace of an event, to see it in purely evidentiary terms, is perhaps to believe our own figures of speech too rigorously. If, as Benjamin indicates, a poem is itself an event, a trauma that

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[85] Linda Reinfeld, *Language Poetry: Writing as Rescue*, Horizons in Theory and American Culture (Baton Rouge, Louisiana: Louisiana State University Press, 1992), p. 137.
[86] This interest in 'visible absence' is recurrent within the tradition of American literature. It is, perhaps, best exemplified by Herman Melville in *Moby Dick* in his consideration of the whiteness of the whale, from which I takes the phrase 'visible absence'. See Herman Melville, *Moby Dick* (1851), ed. by Tony Tanner (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 175.
[87] Forché, p. 31.

changes both a common language and an individual psyche, it is a specific kind of event, a specific kind of trauma. It is an experience entered into voluntarily. Unlike an aerial attack, a poem does not come at one unexpectedly. One has to read or listen, one has to be willing to accept the trauma. So, if a poem is an event and the trace of an event, it has, by definition, to belong to a different order of being from the trauma that marked its language in the first place.[88]

Though all but the opening lines of 'After Auschwitz' stress the spatial and temporal distance that lies between the speaker and the events of the Holocaust – to which no direct reference is made after the first stanza – the title clearly posits the atrocities in Europe as a decisive break in history, following which nothing *should* ever be the same. While 'My Friend, My Friend' inscribes this traumatic rupture through its repetitive poetic paroxysms, which imitate the persistent, compulsive exertions of the traumatized psyche, Sexton's use of repetitive strategies in 'After Auschwitz' is more readily locatable in relation to the hypnotic, sonorous patterns of religious incantation. Given that *The Awful Rowing Toward God* speaks to Sexton's imaginative engagement with 'the agonizing search for God'; or a God who is 'infinitely bound up in man, and in the things of this world', it is perhaps unsurprising that the penultimate (and longest) stanza of 'After Auschwitz' should resemble a prayer, being comprised of a series of supplications beginning with the phrase 'Let man never again…'.[89] Like Adorno, the speaker finds it inconceivable that life and art should remain unchanged after Auschwitz, and yet Man still drinks his tea, ties his shoelaces, looks at the stars, and, most significantly, writes books. Read alongside the title, 'After Auschwitz'; the speaker's lamentation that Man should 'never again write a book', echoes not only the logic but also the terminology of Adorno's 'no art after Auschwitz' statement. The fact that the poem itself is evidence of the continuation of cultural production in the

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[88] Forché, p. 33.
[89] Anne Sexton, *The Awful Rowing Toward God* (Boston; Houghton Mifflin, 1975), cover matter.

wake of the Holocaust reveals the futility of the speaker's prayer and, by extension, questions the purpose and role of a non-interventionist God. Despite her longing for a divinely administered justice, Man still raises his teacup, puts on his shoes, and looks up to the evening sky. Like the figure of 'death' who views human suffering 'with a casual eye', the world at large appears to be unaltered by its exposure to, or refreshed awareness of, human depravity.

Although 'After Auschwitz' clearly expresses the speaker's sympathy with the victims of the Holocaust, the religious commitments of these victims do not figure within the poem. In contrast to 'My Friend, My Friend', Sexton does not articulate the speaker's special affinity to the figure of the Jew; rather, the speaker, as a remote 'witness', functions as something akin to a one-woman Greek chorus, condemning human cruelty and calling for catharsis in the wake of great losses.

Interestingly, the lurid image that forms the fulcrum of 'After Auschwitz' – the Nazis' cannibalization of infants – also underpins a poem that Sexton wrote for her 1971 collection, *Transformations*. In *Transformations*, Sexton put her unique contemporary spin on the tales of the Brothers Grimm. In the case of 'Hansel and Gretel', Sexton fringes the Grimms' story of parental abandonment with references to the Second World War and the Final Solution. Stretching the language of maternal affection, the prologue draws out the cannibalistic undertones of the parent-child dialogue, which are then resituated alongside references to twentieth-century conflict:

> Little plum,
> said the mother to her son,
> I want to bite,
> I want to chew,
> I will eat you up.
> Little child,
> little nubkin,
> sweet as fudge,

you are my blitz.
/
I have a pan that will fit you.
Just pull up your knees like a game hen.
Let me take your pulse
and set the oven for 350.

The mother's articulation of her desire to incorporate – or reincorporate – her child frames a characterization of this same child as a 'blitz'. Even in 1971, the term 'blitz' was primarily associated with the German bombing campaign in Britain. The child, then, is posited as the potential agency of the mother's destruction and, simultaneously, as prey that is eminently vulnerable to the mother's devouring fantasies. These fantasies are made all the more menacing as a result of the fact that they are absorbed into the innocuous, if quotidian, business of domesticity – cast into the instructional language of a cooking recipe. The concluding lines of the prologue constitute a maternal acknowledgement of the precariously metaphorical nature of the cannibalistic language that parents direct towards children: 'Oh succulent one, / it is but one turn in the road / and I would be a cannibal!'. The parental desire to protect is, in this instance, conceived as circumstantial; it is only 'one turn in the road' that stands between metaphor and practice. Cannibalism is, it seems, an outcome borne of necessity, an accident of luck.

As in the Grimm version of the tale, Hansel, Gretel, and their parents have 'come upon evil times'.[90] Desperate for food, they have 'cooked the dog / and served him up like lamb chops', leaving a loaf of bread as their sole means of immediate sustenance. Faced with the grim prospect of surviving on such meagre supplies, it is

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[90] See Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, 'Hansel and Gretel', *The Classic Fairy Tales*, ed. by Maria Tatar (London and New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1999), pp. 184-90.

the mother of Hansel and Gretel (and not the stepmother, as it is in the Grimm original) who contrives to resolve the predicament:

> The final solution,
> their mother told their father,
> was to lose the children in the forest.
> We have enough bread for ourselves
> but none for them.

With deliberate clarity, Sexton deploys the Nazis' euphemistic codename for the extermination of the European Jewry – the 'final solution' – to describe a mother's plan to murder her children. In this way, a fictional narrative of maternal betrayal is tentatively advanced as an allegorical reworking of the Holocaust – a course of events which was itself determined by the repeated betrayal of the Jewish people by the Third Reich, fellow citizens, religious elders, and, ultimately, an international community that failed to intervene in the genocide. By reformulating the stepmother of the Grimms' 'Hansel and Gretel' as the children's real, biological mother, Sexton stresses the complete, heinous, and immediate nature of the betrayal that propels the narrative. In situations of extremity, even the imagined sanctity of the mother-child relationship is rendered violable.

In Sexton's version, as in the original story, Hansel and Gretel are abandoned to the forest. Hansel, seemingly the most resourceful of the pair, drops a trail of breadcrumbs to lead himself and his sister back home, but they are eaten by the birds. The siblings, then, 'are lost at last'. After 'twenty days and twenty nights' in the wilderness they arrive at a house 'made all of food from its windows / to its chocolate chimney', which is, perhaps predictably, inhabited by a witch. Despite the extravagant edibility of her domicile, the witch – another permutation of the devouring mother –

resolves to kill and eat Hansel, 'the smarter, the bigger, / the juicier' of the two and, in-keeping with the poem's theme of betrayal, seeks to solicit Gretel's complicity in the cannibalization of her brother:

> She spoke to Gretel
> and told her how her brother
> would be better than mutton;
> how a thrill would go through her
> as she smelled him cooking;
> how she would lay the table
> and sharpen the knives
> and neglect none of the refinements.

As an afterthought, the witch decides that Gretel might make a good 'hors d'oeuvre':

> She explained to Gretel
> that she must climb into the oven
> to see if she would fit,
> Gretel spoke at last:
> Ja, Fräulein, show me how it can be done.
> /
> Gretel,
> seeing her moment in history,
> shut fast the oven ,
> locked fast the door,
> fast as Houdini,
> and turned the oven on to bake.
> The witch turned as red
> as the Jap flag.

Sexton here develops her earlier reference to the Final Solution with the image of the oven, a domestic version of the industrial crematoria that the Nazis used to incinerate the bodies of those who were murdered in the gas chambers. The function of the oven is, then, radically subverted; instead of sustaining life, this oven, like those designed by the Nazis, destroys it.

In *Anne Sexton and Middle Generation Poetry*, Philip McGowan argues that the 'twisting of the maternal into deformed versions of femininity' that underlies the

Grimm version of 'Hansel and Gretel' has 'serious effects on the development of the children, particularly in relation to their use of language and sign systems'.[91] Rooting his reading in the Lacanian logic that 'our entry into language is precipitated by the separation from the maternal', McGowan proceeds to contend that 'Hansel and Gretel's entrance into the realm of signification is facilitated by the stepmother's selfish intention to see them die'.[92] According to McGowan, it is '[t]he horror of their prospective abandonment, overheard by the children, [that] motivates their development of a code that will lead them back to the former security of their home'.[93] While McGowan is quick to posit Hansel's dispersal of pebbles as a 'vital signifying route back home [that forms] a narrative of their trail in the forest', he fails to account for the important role that Sexton accords to speech – particularly female speech – in her version of the fairy tale. Mastery of language and the ability to speak are, for Sexton, inextricable from questions of empowerment. From the point at which Hansel and Gretel enter the witch's house, they are silent. Despite being the architect of 'a vital signifying route back home' (less vital, perhaps, as a result of the fact that it fails), Hansel is, in Sexton's version, locked out of the realm of language. A number of Holocaust scholars, including Robert Michael and Karin Doerr in their 2002 monograph, *Nazi-Deutsch/Nazi-German*, have sought to analyse the extent to which the power and 'success' of the Third Reich was bound up with their control and manipulation of the German tongue. As Arthur Cohen comments in *The Tremendum*, the German used by the Nazis was a language that had been stripped 'of its shading

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[91] Philip McGowan, *Anne Sexton and Middle Generation Poetry: The Geography of Grief* (Westport, Connecticut and London: Praeger, 2004), p. 84.
[92] McGowan, p. 84.
[93] McGowan, p. 84.

and moral intensity', and which relied heavily on the use of euphemism and metaphor to disguise the brutality of the regime's objectives.[94]

In the context of 'Hansel and Gretel', it is the witch, with whom power resides, who commands language, and she is repeatedly represented in a posture of enunciation. In the extract above, for example, she 'spoke' to Gretel and 'told' her how her brother would die, while Gretel, 'who had said nothing so far', simply nodded and wept. It is only when Gretel speaks 'at last' that the witch is defeated. As in 'Daddy', the un-translated German phrase – 'Ja, Fräulein' – generates a strange tension within the poem. Gretel, on the brink of overthrowing her malevolent captor, speaks in a language which, though her own, the postwar American reader would tend to associate with totalitarian oppression. Her empowerment is thus augured by a phrase that identifies her with her captor, the witch.

Importantly, Gretel's triumph over the witch is not formulated in purely personal terms. Rather, its significance extends beyond the self; it is 'her moment *in history*'– a moment, that is, in an ongoing *collective* narrative [emphasis added]. Considered from this angle, Sexton's 'Hansel and Gretel' – a tale of abandonment, imperilment, and victory that is shot through by references to the Holocaust – might be productively reread as an imaginative corrective to the real events of the Second World War. Hansel and Gretel are, after all, the children who come back from the ovens, the would-be victims who, through Gretel's ingenuity, are able to conquer their captor and survive.

As I acknowledged earlier, Janet, alongside other, contemporary theorists, has argued that traumatic memory is characterized primarily by inflexibility: the traumatic

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[94] Arthur Allen Cohen, *The Tremendum: A Theological Interpretation of the Holocaust* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), pp. 7-8.

event resists integration within existing cognitive schemata and, as a result, cannot be organized at the level of language. This is due in part to the fact that remembering and narrating the traumatic experience necessarily involves overcoming the sense of passivity by which that experience is defined. According to Bessel A. van der Kolk and Onno van der Hart, 'a feeling of helplessness, of physical or emotional paralysis, is fundamental to making an experience traumatic: the person was unable to take any action that could affect the outcome of events'.[95] If, as Janet argues, 'memory is an action' (in essence 'the action of telling a story'), then it is perhaps unsurprising that the traumatized subject – one who 'was unable to take any action that could affect the outcome of events' – should struggle to engage in an 'action' of remembering an event to which his or her sense of *in*action is so fundamental.[96]

While the ability to arrange traumatic experience into an intelligible narrative is widely posited as a crucial step on the road to recovery, Janet has argued that this narrative need not necessarily correspond to the 'reality' of the event itself (as far as one can speak about such a thing). In *Psychological Healing*, he describes his attempts to 'cure' traumatic memories through the practice of substitution, whereby 'the [traumatic] scenes imagined by the subject [are] transformed'.[97] In the case of a mother who lost two of her children in quick succession, her traumatic symptoms persisted, according to Janet, until he was 'able to modify her memory of the death[s]'.[98] In dealing with trauma, then, memory needs to become an 'adaptive action'[99]: 'Once flexibility is introduced, the traumatic memory starts losing its power

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[95] Van der Kolk and van der Hart, p. 175.
[96] Janet qtd. in van der Kolk and van der Hart, p. 175.
[97] Janet, *Psychological Healing*, p. 677.
[98] Janet, *Psychological Healing*, p. 677.
[99] Janet qtd. in van der Kolk and van der Hart, p. 175.

over current experience'.[100] For this reason, the imaginative construction of *alternative* narratives – narratives which deliberately contradict the remembered details of the event – may serve to expedite the rehabilitation of the traumatized subject. As van der Kolk and van der Hart explain:

> [I]n therapy, memory paradoxically needs to become an act of creation rather than the static recording of events. Because the essence of the trauma is that it once confronted the victim with unacceptable reality, the patient needs to find a way of confronting the hidden secrets that no-one, including the patient, wants to face. Like memories of ordinary events, the memory of the trauma needs to become merely a (often distorted) part of the patient's past.[101]

In light of this hypothesis, I would like to suggest that Sexton's 'Hansel and Gretel' might represent an attempt to master the 'unacceptable reality' of the Holocaust. Through the magical prism of the fairy tale, Sexton works to address the collective sense of powerlessness to which the events in Europe gave rise. By imagining Gretel's 'moment in history' as a moment in which Gretel turns on her captor and consigns her to the oven – and thus to the death that she herself was intended to suffer – Sexton enacts a fantastical, retributive justice upon the engineers of the Nazi genocide. Her 'transformation' of the Grimm version of 'Hansel and Gretel' is also, then, an imaginative transformation of recent history that constitutes part of a collective working-through of the Holocaust by those who did not experience it directly.

Though not true of 'Hansel and Gretel', Sexton's use of Holocaust imagery tends to involve the staging of a special identification between the speaker and Judaic victimization. Perhaps the most ill-advised of Sexton's excursions into the

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[100] Van der Kolk and van der Hart, p. 178.
[101] Bessel A. van der Kolk and Alexander C. McFarlane, 'The Black Hole of Trauma', *Traumatic Stress: The Effects of Overwhelming Experience on Mind, Body, and Society*, ed. by Bessel A. van der Kolk, Alexander C. McFarlane, and Lars Weisaeth (London: The Guilford Press, 1996), p. 19.

imaginative terrain of the Holocaust is an unpublished poem, written only five months before her suicide, entitled 'Uses'.[102] Dated May 1 1974, 'Uses' sees Sexton appropriating the Jewish voice – or a voice that purports to be Jewish – in order to stage a more direct confrontation between the reader and the 'facts' of the Holocaust. As the poem is not included in any of Sexton's published collections, I have reproduced it in its entirety below:

> Papa died in the gas chamber,
> slipping blue as an undressed minnow,
> gulping in the shower to wash the Jew off him.
> Mama died in the medical experiments,
> they had stuffed a pig into her womb
> and the pig died and after she lost her vision,
> she lost her heart stuffing.
>
> I, alone, came through,
> starved but making it by eating
> a body or two.
>
> Then came the Americans with peanut butter.
> I gobbled it up like a vacation.
> I loved them all, even the G.I. who said 'Jew pig'
> and put it into me, into me,
> though I was only eleven.
>
> Later I joined a convent,
> to fall in love with a Jesus home
> but I had to leave,
> for I was turning gray, hair, eyes, nose, mouth, face.
> I was a mouse
> searching for its cheddar trap.
>
> I never cried.
> Remember that!
> I never cried.
>
> Then the U.S.
> and its funny cities of butter
> buildings without bullet holes
> or bombed out towns.

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[102] Anne Sexton, 'Uses' (May 1 1974). HRHRC, Box 10, folder 7.

But it had jails
and I flew into one
and stood in the cell with the whores
and hung onto the bars,
saying nothing except
'I am a Jew.
Can't you do something with it?'

There is, quite clearly, a marked disparity between this late poem and the other works to which I've already drawn attention. Where poems like 'My Friend, My Friend', 'KE 6-8018', 'Flee On Your Donkey', and 'After Auschwitz' show Sexton attempting to engage formally with the problem of aestheticizing the Holocaust, 'Uses' operates at a more straightforwardly descriptive level. As becomes clear after the briefest glance at its various stanzas, Sexton's poetics are not so much 'awkward' here as slick; there is no formal tension, compulsive repetition or jarring syntax. It is, rather, a poem which dwells insistently on the Holocaust's most sensational details: the gas chambers, the medical experiments, the sexual brutality, and the reported acts of cannibalization.[103] Sexton organizes this difficult subject matter into a coherent, progressive narrative, but, in doing so, she seems to ignore the capacity of the traumatic event to confound traditional representational strategies. From her father's execution and her mother's torture to her own rape and imprisonment, the speaker recounts her memories rapidly, lucidly, and with a degree of studied dispassion – a dispassion which, perhaps, speaks to her inability to 'remember' these events fully: 'I

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[103] While Middlebrook makes no specific reference to 'Uses', she does observe that Sexton's approach to poetry in the months leading up to her death (at which time the poem was written) was increasingly lacking in care: 'Sexton wasn't writing poems anymore; she was writing anguished appeals for attention. . . . [Her excessive drinking] deprived her of "the little critic" in her head that she had formerly summoned to the task of cut, cut, cut, expand, expand, expand, cut, cut, cut. She had the drunk's fluency, but not the artist's cunning'. See Middlebrook, pp. 379-80. Similarly, with reference to Sexton's late poetry, Linda Gray Sexton and Lois Ames explain that the 'days of spending months over a single stanza were gone. Often her poetic instincts and natural ear allowed her to produce spontaneous poems that needed little revision, but many more awkward mistakes also slipped through into print. An unfinished tone crept in among the polished words. Her imagery became wilder, her lines more prosaic'. See Anne Sexton, *A Self-Portrait in Letters* (1977), ed. by Linda Gray Sexton and Lois Ames (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1991), p. 391.

never cried. / Remember that! / I never cried'.

If Sexton's references to the Holocaust are usually predicated on a Nazi-Jew antagonism, in which the former is positioned as history's ultimate sadist, 'Uses' departs, to some extent, from this tried and tested formula. In 'Uses', after all, the perpetration of violence is not the sole province of the Nazi; it is the American G.I., the speaker's implied saviour, who calls her a 'Jew pig' and then rapes her – an act of violence that is rendered in terms which are strikingly similar to those used by Sexton in a late poem about the Vietnam War, to which I will refer directly in the closing chapter of this thesis.

Just as Sexton's treatment of the Holocaust can only be understood through close reference to her use of form, so her treatment of Cold War concerns about containment, surveillance, contamination, and political stability demand a similar degree of attentiveness to the metrical dimensions of her poetry. It is Sexton's representations of these discrete, if interlocking, anxieties that forms the basis of the next, and final, part of this thesis.

PART THREE: SEXTON AND THE COLD WAR

9. Containment, Privacy, and Surveillance

While the United States surfaced from the Second World War as the most powerful nation in the world, the damage wreaked upon the Soviet Union in terms of industry, agriculture, resources, and human life had left the nation crippled and in fear of its political security. In order to consolidate its position as the nucleus of global communism, the Soviet Union adopted an ethic of expansionism; in the immediate aftermath of the war Stalin installed Soviet-friendly regimes in Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Romania, and Bulgaria. Given the fragile international climate, Soviet expansionism raised alarms about the potential spread of communism, and the threat that it posed to the geopolitical stability of the United States. In response, then, President Truman's postwar administration developed a conservative foreign policy that sought to achieve and preserve a new international equilibrium through the containment of communist influence.[1] Now a standard feature of contemporary American histories, 'containment' was originally inscribed into the Cold War lexicon by George F. Kennan, a political historian and the key architect of the Truman administration's postwar diplomatic strategy, who sought to promote the 'firm and vigilant containment of Russian expansive tendencies'.[2] Repudiating the ideals of freedom and privacy that underwrite liberal democracy, communism and its radical rhetoric would, if allowed to spread, destabilize the system of values upon which the United States was, and is, so proudly conditioned. Through

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[1] This defensive approach to foreign policy persisted throughout the Cold War. As John Lewis Gaddis explained, '[t]he fundamental objective of our foreign policy . . . must always be . . . to protect the security of the nation, by which is meant the continued ability of this country to pursue the development of its internal life without serious interference, or threat of interference, from foreign powers; and . . . to advance the welfare of its people, by promoting a world order in which this nation can make the maximum contribution to the peaceful and orderly development of other nations and derive maximum benefit from their experiences and abilities'. See John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of Postwar American National Security Policy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), p. 27.

[2] George F. Kennan, 'The Sources of Soviet Conduct' (1947), *American Diplomacy, 1900-1950* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1952), pp. 107-24 (p. 117). This article was originally published in *Foreign Affairs* in the July of 1947 and is also known as the 'X-Article', on account of the fact that Kennan published it anonymously.

containment, then, it was hoped that the potential effects of communist ideology upon Western capitalism might be usefully minimized. While somewhat hysterical, the American reaction to communist thought was, to some extent, justified. As Stephen J. Whitfield argues in *The Culture of the Cold War*, when 'judged in the light of liberal democratic ideals, of the promise inherent in personal autonomy and of the conventions of ordinary decency, Communism *was* evil'.[3] In order to address the seriousness of the danger that communism posed to American national security – and to counteract what Whitfield identifies as a prevailing lack of interest in foreign policy – it was imperative that the Red threat be relocated to American soil. During the two decades that followed World War II, then, the popular media endeavoured to persuade Cold War Americans 'to interpret their world in terms of insidious enemies at home and abroad who threatened them with nuclear and other forms of annihilation'.[4] As Whitfield argues:

> With the source of evil so elusive and so immune to risk-free retaliation, American culture was politicized. The values and perceptions, the forms of expression, the symbolic patterns, the beliefs and myths that enabled Americans to make sense of reality – these constituents of culture were contaminated by an unseemly political interest in their roots and consequences. The struggle against domestic Communism encouraged an interpenetration of the two enterprises of politics and culture, resulting in a philistine inspection of artistic works not for their content but for the *politique des auteurs*.[5]

Popularly (re)configured within American culture, containment evolved from a cautious political strategy into an increasingly mobile concept that informed a range of social, cultural, and aesthetic practices. As Elaine Tyler May remarks in *Homeward Bound*:

> Containment was the key to security. . . . The power of the Soviet Union would not endanger national security if it could be contained within a clearly-defined sphere of influence. But the term also describes the response to other postwar developments.

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[3] Stephen J. Whitfield, *The Culture of the Cold War* 2nd edn. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), p. 2.
[4] Peter J. Kuznick and James Gilbert qtd. by Robert J. McMahon, *A Very Short Introduction to the Cold War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 118.
[5] Whitfield, p. 10

> The terrifying destructive potential of the atomic bomb would not be a threat if it could be contained, first in the hands of the United States and later through peaceful applications. . . . Domestic anticommunism was another manifestation of containment: if presumably subversive individuals could be contained and prevented from spreading their poisonous influence through the body politic, then the society could feel secure.[6]

While containment is conventionally identified with Cold War political concerns, May has argued convincingly that the doctrine cannot, and should not, be disentangled from its social, cultural, and domestic extensions: 'More than a metaphor for the cold war on the homefront', containment, in May's view, describes 'the way in which public policy, personal behaviour, and even political values were focused in the home'.[7] Thus prioritizing and politicizing the often-neglected sphere of the home, containment necessarily disturbed the category of the private, which was defined, in part, in relation to the domestic. If the home was to be instrumental in the fight against communism, after all, then it could not be closed off from external forms of social and political intervention. What evolved, then, was a 'crisis in privacy', the nature of which Deborah Nelson has recently outlined:

> The surge of critical reflection on modernity that followed World War II made evident to the intellectual vanguard in this country that the boundaries between public and private life were highly unstable in both mass democracies and totalitarian regimes. . . . The potency of American democracy in cold war rhetoric was, therefore, not its cultivation of a vibrant and free public discourse but its vigilant protection of private autonomy. Moreover, the stakes of this conviction were typically apocalyptic: either we preserved the integrity of private spaces and thus the free world, or we tolerated their penetration and took the first step toward totalitarian oppression. The very starkness of this choice manufactured the cold war's governing paradox: in the interests of preserving the space of privacy, privacy would have to be penetrated.[8]

The radical destabilization of privacy to which Nelson here attests is registered at a cultural level in the rise of literary subjectivism. Through recourse to narrative strategies of self-

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[6] Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (1988), 2nd edn. (New York: Basic Books, 1999), pp. xxiv-xxv.
[7] May, p. xxv.
[8] Nelson, pp. xii-xiii.

disclosure and the focalization of private psychic experience, works by Cold War American writers such as J. D. Salinger, Norman Mailer, Ralph Ellison, and Philip Roth spoke both to the anxieties that swirled around the issue of privacy, and to the increasingly urgent need to engage critically with the politics of the personal. While prose works such as Tillie Olsen's *Tell Me a Riddle* (1961) utilize the confessional mode to explore female interiority within a domestic context, it is in the work of the confessional poets that the simultaneous penetration of psychic and domestic space is most compellingly staged. From the late 1950s onwards, Lowell, Snodgrass, and Plath were routinely deploying the metaphor of the home as a means of illuminating tensions between inside and outside, order and chaos, private and public, and domesticity and politics – the axes upon which the Cold War doctrine of containment rotated. Like that of Lowell, Snodgrass, and Plath, Sexton's early poetry not only encodes, but also questions and vexes the logic of containment; her imaginative excursions into the private recesses of the domestic arena provides a neat spatial metaphor for her ongoing excavation of the female psyche, as it takes place across her ten collections of poetry. In 'What's That (1960)', 'For John, Who Begs Me Not to Enquire Further (1960)', and 'I Live in a Dollhouse' (undated), [9] Sexton envisions the home as a site of enclosure, within which the influence of the (female) speakers is, for the most part, contained.[10] In 'Housewife' (1962), Sexton not only feminizes but also anthropomorphizes the home, characterizing it, ostensibly, as 'another kind of skin' with 'a heart, / a mouth, a liver and bowel movements' and walls that are 'permanent and pink'. While this convergence of woman and home describes an experience of containment that is explicitly feminine, it also, more subversively, advances the domestic as a site of connection; an imaginative space within which, or over which, women can commune. Equipped with a mouth, after all, the woman-home is poised for

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[9] Anne Sexton, 'I Live in a Dollhouse' (undated). HRHRC, Box 10, folder 1. This poem is also listed under 'The lady lives in a dollhouse'.
[10] Sexton, 'I Live in a Dollhouse', HRHRC, Box 10, folder 1.

communication, ready to break her architectural borders and articulate the stuff of private, domestic, feminine experience. This conflation is further extrapolated in 'There You Were' (1976), a late poem in which the speaker is identified entirely with the edificial structures of the home:

> The house of my body has spoken
> often as you rebuild me like blocks,
> and promise to come visit
> when I'm finally adjusted on safe land,
> and am livable, joist to joist
> with storm windows and screens,
> mattresses, fixtures,
> sand dollars, cups –
> inhabitable and all that.
> But not for sale!

For the poet Richard Wilbur, moreover, the home – this favoured venue of postwar literature – functioned as a convenient lens through which to view the dilemma of privacy, as it presented itself to American writers:

> [S]ome writers think of art as a window, and some think of it as a door. If art is a window, then the poem is something intermediate in character, limited, synecdochic, a partial vision of a part of the world. . . . If art is conceived to be a door . . . the artist no longer perceives a wall between him and the world; the world becomes an extension of himself, and is deprived of its reality. The poet's words cease to be a means of liaison with the world; they take the place of the world. This is bad aesthetics—and incidentally, bad morals.[11]

Reciting Wilbur's quotation in a 1973 interview, Sexton questioned the ethical and aesthetic assumptions with which it is struck through, commenting wryly that 'I guess . . . I was the

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[11] Richard Wilbur qtd. in David Yezzi, 'Confessional Poetry and the Artifice of Honesty', *The New Criterion*, 16.10 (June 1998). < http://www.newcriterion.com:81/archive/16/jun98/confess.htm>. [Accessed August 3 2005]. For a fuller discussion of Wilbur's comments see John Ciardi, *Mid-Century Poets*, ed. by John Ciardi (New York: Twayne, 1950).

door, or something'.[12] While the subject matter of Sexton's work does challenge traditional conceptualizations of public and private, however, her words are always a point of contact, a 'means of liaison with the world': they do not 'take the place of the world' in the (impossible) textual eclipse that Wilbur imagines. Rather, as Sexton's speaker in 'For John, Who Begs Me Not To Enquire Further' explains, the textual inscription of 'private' experience – whether real or imagined – works to interrogate the borders of subjectivity itself by eliciting moments of intense identification between the poet and the reader: 'At first it was private. / Then it was more than myself; / it was you, or your house / or your kitchen'. Eroding the fragile borders of privacy, a poetics of self-disclosure is, as Sexton envisions it, a poetics that is necessarily concerned with the *limits* of containment. There is a sense, then, in which Sexton's poems might be read as sites of rupture where the containment of 'private' experience fails, but at which the order of containment is, simultaneously, re-asserted at the level of poetic form.[13] In other words, if the content of Sexton's poetry violates the ethos of privacy that the culture of containment seeks to uphold, then this subversive manoeuvre is countervailed, to some extent, by the form through which this content is mediated. As Sexton describes it, using form was, for her, 'like letting a lot of wild animals out in the arena, but enclosing them in a cage . . . [Y]ou could let some extraordinary animal out if you had the right cage, and that cage would be form.[14] She also claimed to use form when she 'hurt the most. I make up a cage that is strong enough to hold the poem in, as in the circus, as with the wild animal. Form acts like a superego, permitting this angry thing to enter the arena'.[15] In the following chapters, then, I am not only interested in the extent to which the political inflections of Sexton's work are expressed in directly referential terms, but also in the way

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[12] William Heyen and Al Poulin, Interview with Anne Sexton, *No Evil Star: Selected Essays, Interviews, and Prose*, ed. by Steven E. Colburn (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1985), pp. 130-57 (p. 135).
[13] Marx, p. 74
[14] Marx, p. 80
[15] Anne Sexton, Statement for the Poetry Book Society (undated). HRHRC, Box 16, folder 4.

that they are woven into the textual fabric of the poetry itself. This tension between control and release is expressed in a number of Sexton's earliest poems, and is particularly prevalent in those which turn on the themes of insanity, death, violence, and institutionalization – poems such as 'You, Doctor Martin' (1960), 'Said the Poet to the Analyst' (1960), 'The Operation' (1962), and 'Live' (1966).

Written in 1958 at the height of the Cold War, 'You, Doctor Martin' gestures towards the ideology of containment both through its content – which revolves around the speaker's experience of institutionalization in a psychiatric facility – and also, more interestingly, through its formal organization. From the outset, the speaker and her fellow patients are rigidly controlled; they 'stand in broken / lines and wait while they unlock / the door and count us at the frozen gates / of dinner'. By book-ending these lines with words that describe the architecture of enclosure – 'lines', 'unlock', 'door', and 'gates' – Sexton not only stresses the physical restrictions to which the speaker is subject, but also draws attention to the blockading function of the line itself, which performs containment at the level of poetic structure. As Jeanne Kammer Neff observes, 'the gleeful, murderous, placating tones of the inmate/patient [the speaker] [are] held in check by an orderly visual pattern' that is both 'tidy and symmetrical'.[16] This tidy visual symmetry is not, however, enough to contain the disorderly force of the speaker's erratic disclosures, which propel the poem towards a point of crisis:

> . . . There are no knives
> for cutting your throat. I make
> moccasins all morning. At first my hands
> kept empty, unraveled for the lives
> they used to work. Now I learn to take
> them back, each angry finger that demands

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[16] Jeanne Kammer Neff, 'The Witch's Life: Confession and Control in the Early Poetry of Anne Sexton,' *Sexton: Selected Criticism*, ed. by Diana Hume George (Urbana and Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1988), pp. 274-82 (p. 275).

I mend what another will break

tomorrow.

Running across the third and fourth stanzas, these references to anger, frustration, and violence lie at the literal and metaphorical heart of the poem, and speak emphatically to the limits of containment: as complete syntactic units bleed across lines and stanzas, Sexton evokes a psychic excess that threatens to shatter the fragile illusion of order that emanates from the poem's over-determined visual arrangement.

In accordance with the principle objective of containment – to expunge or evacuate mainstream society of subversive, disorderly elements – the speaker is removed from the domestic 'sphere of influence' to the secure environment of the asylum, where her movements can be monitored and controlled.[17] This is a zone in which privacy is rendered impossible, where the eponymous Doctor Martin is, seemingly, both omnipotent and omniscient:

. . . Of course, I love you;
you lean above the plastic sky,
god of our block, prince of all the foxes.
The breaking crowns are new
that Jack wore. Your third eye
moves among us and lights the separate boxes
where we sleep or cry.

In these lines, the observational capacity of Doctor Martin is abstracted into a range of optical metaphors. In the next stanza '*your* third eye' becomes '*an* oracular / eye in our nest' [emphasis added]. Here, then, the shift from 'your' to 'an' designates the depersonalization of the surveillance encounter, while the use of the term 'oracular' gestures towards the

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[17] May, p. xxiv.

increasingly panoptical and prophetic nature of this institutional surveillance. As is evident in 'You, Doctor Martin', surveillance, its limitations, and the fears to which it gives rise, are central to Sexton's early poetry. In addition, I would like to suggest that the scopophilic anxieties with which her work is charged demonstrate a conscious critical engagement with contemporaneous political discourses concerning the status of constitutional (privacy) rights in the imperilled climate of Cold War America. Given that Sexton began her writing career in 1956, by which time the fear of Soviet infiltration had reached its hysterical zenith, this engagement is, in many ways, unremarkable. As I mentioned earlier, the increasingly totalitarian complexion of governmental responses to the Red menace has been identified by a number of Cold War scholars. These responses were invariably structured around very public attempts to indict suspected Communist activists, sympathizers and other political radicals, and were eminently contingent upon breaches of privacy that were simultaneously personal, civil and bureaucratic. McCarthy's investigations into Communist subversion, which fed into the operations of HUAC, were fuelled largely by an unofficial information-sharing policy with J. Edgar Hoover, the longstanding director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI). Hoover, as well as countenancing the illegal leakage of classified FBI files to McCarthy, was unscrupulous in his information-gathering methods and repeatedly violated the constitutional liberties that are guaranteed to all American citizens. Remarking upon these infringements in *A Culture of Secrecy: The Government Versus the People's Right to Know*, Athan G. Theoharis refers to the FBI's use of 'recognizably illegal investigative techniques such as wiretaps and break-ins' and their equally dubious implementation of 'secret programs to contain targeted organizations and their leaders, whether the Communist Party, the Black Panthers, the New Left, or the Ku Klux Klan'.[18] In May, 1958 Canadian

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[18] Athan G. Theoharis, *A Culture of Secrecy: The Government Versus the People's Right to Know*, (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1998), p. 3.

industrialist Cyrus Eaton publicly condemned the FBI for its role 'in investigating, in snooping, in informing, in creeping up on people'.[19] While this brand of state-sponsored surveillance was advocated by some Americans as a necessary bulwark against the Soviet threat, the technologies of which it made use were coming to feature more and more prominently in the lives of ordinary citizens. Psychological testing, computer databases, financial profiling, and the covert electronic surveillance of public spaces each testified to an increasingly pervasive disavowal of individual privacy rights, as facilitated by a combination of new technology and mass paranoia about internal and external threats to American democracy. In Nelson's summary, 'the means of surveillance grew more precise as the motives [for surveillance] expanded, encompassing ever-broadening areas of behaviour and belief'.[20] Privacy, then, was gradually being erased under the pretext of national political survival.

This incremental re-scripting of public and private space was not only consequent upon developments in surveillance technologies, but was also informed by the mainstreaming of 'psychiatric modes of thought' in the postwar period.[21] At this time, both E. L. Kelly and Alfred Kinsey conducted large-scale empirical investigations into the sexual behaviours of white Americans – investigations which necessarily relied upon the participants' willingness to disclose intimate information about their personal lives. Contingent upon this type of voluntary disclosure, the Kelly Longitudinal Study (1935-1955) and the Kinsey reports (1948 and 1953), each demonstrated the increasing instability of the boundary between 'public' and 'private' upon which the logic of containment was so precariously predicated. This instability was likewise registered in academic works such as Erich Fromm's *Escape From Freedom* (1941), Bruno Bettelheim's 'Individual and Mass Behaviour in Extreme Situations' (1943),

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[19] Whitfield, p. 124.
[20] Nelson, pp. 10-11.
[21] Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations* (London: W. W. Norton and Company, 1991), p. 25.

Theodor Adorno's *The Authoritarian Personality* (1950), and Hannah Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951), in which major historical events like the Holocaust and the Second World War were reassessed alongside theories of the mind.[22] In *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, for example, Arendt proposes that the dissolution of Nazi Germany brought about 'the first appropriate moment to look upon contemporary events with the backward-directed glance of the historian and the analytical zeal of the political scientist [and] . . . the first possible moment to articulate and to elaborate the questions with which my generation had been forced to live for the better part of its adult life: *What happened? Why did it happen? How could it have happened?*'[23] While Arendt, in exploring these questions, examines the various historical, political, and economic factors that combined to make totalitarianism a viable prospect in the early decades of the twentieth century, she also investigates the role of human psychology in mobilizing these mass movements. Such analyses of the recent past were largely coincident with the emergence of 'therapy for the normal'[24], in which 'Americans outside elite circles learned about psychotherapies not only through education, newspapers and film, but also through one form or another of direct experience'.[25] In *The Romance of American Psychology: Political Culture in the Age of Experts* (1996), Ellen Herman considers the growing convergence of psychological and political modes of thought through the lens of Cold War militarism and foreign policy.[26] Citing the military's status as the primary sponsor of large-scale psychological studies in the years between 1945 and 1965, Herman shows how the psychology of the individual came to

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[22] Erich Fromm, *Escape From Freedom* (1941) (New York: Owl Books, 1994); Bruno Bettelheim, 'Individual and Mass Behaviour in Extreme Situations', *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology* 38 (October 1943), pp. 417-52; Theodor Adorno, *The Authoritarian Personality* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1950); and Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951), 3rd. edn. (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1967).
[23] Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, pp. vii-viii.
[24] Nancy Schnog, 'On Inventing the Psychological,' *Inventing the Psychological: Toward a Cultural History of Emotional Life in America*, ed. by Joel Pfister and Nancy Schnog (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1997), pp. 3-16 (p. 6).
[25] Schnog, p. 6.
[26] Ellen Herman, *The Romance of American Psychology: Political Culture in the Age of Experts* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1996), pp. 1-16.

be situated as a political causative (the '*determinant* of ideological preferences' to which Adorno refers in *The Authoritarian Personality* [emphasis in original][27]), and as a means of gaining useful insights into the 'national character' that could be used to undermine the enemy in times of conflict and improve domestic security.[28]

It was around the conceit of 'national character' that the doctrine of Americanism – the proposed corrective to Soviet collectivism – was initially developed. According to Andrew Ross, from whose work I quoted earlier, Americanism functioned as the bedrock of postwar society and was conditioned on a sharp distinction between the 'American' ideals of liberty, individualism, family, and Christian religiosity, and the 'Un-American', collectivist principles of atheism, secrecy, and sexual deviance.[29] In this context of aggressive patriotism, the common citizen was repeatedly called to assist in the identification and eradication of communist subversion. In 1950, readers of the Catholic magazine, the *Brooklyn Tablet*, were told 'It is YOUR job as well as Senator McCarthy's [to get rid of Communists]. What are YOU doing about it?'[30] Similarly, in 1952, Chamber of Commerce employees were asked to 'be on the alert for local Communist sympathizers in [the] community' and to endeavour to 'identify public officials . . . displaying softness towards Communism'.[31] This urge to vigilance not only represented the extension of government surveillance into the private spaces of social interaction, but also factored in the rise of a 'conformity culture', in which displays of 'Un-American' behaviour were likely to be interpreted as direct affronts to the ideals of capitalism and democracy. As well as this personalization of surveillance, the rise of suburbia also contributed to the culture of conformity. The postwar emphasis on conformity that I drew attention to in the introduction reverberates in and across the social thought of the

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[27] Theodor Adorno, *The Authoritarian Personality* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1950), p. 5.
[28] Herman, p. 126.
[29] See Andrew Ross, *No Respect: Intellectuals and Popular Culture* (London: Routledge, 1989), pp. 42-43.
[30] Whitfield, p. 92.
[31] Whitfield, p. 15.

time. David Riesman's *The Lonely Crowd* (1950), C. Wright Mills's *White Collar: The American Middle Classes* (1951), William H. Whyte's *Organization Man* (1956), Vance Packard's *The Hidden Persuaders* (1957), and Herbert Marcuse's *One-Dimensional Man* (1964) illuminated the new phenomenon of middle-class America, unpicking the conformist protocols of white collar business, suburban living, the nuclear family, and consumer society, and evaluating their implications for psychological, political, and economic well-being.[32]

Anxieties about conformity and mass culture are likewise discernible in various examples of Sexton's poetry. 'You, Doctor Martin', for example, is conditioned upon a structural tension between individuality and collectivism that is dramatized through the repeated incorporation of the 'I' of the speaker into the homogenizing folds of plural pronouns such as 'we', 'our', 'us', 'their', and 'they'. Here, then, institutional conformity is configured in a way that is suggestive of its eminently totalitarian dimensions:

> . . . We stand in broken
> lines and wait while they unlock
> the door and count us at the frozen gates
> of dinner. The shibboleth is spoken
> and we move to gravy in our smock
> of smiles. We chew in rows, our plates
> scratch and whine like chalk
>
> in school.

Threaded together by a pronominal chain of 'we' and 'our', these lines reinforce the collective character of the institutional experience that the text sets forth. More urgently,

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[32] See David Riesman (with Reuel Denney and Nathan Glazer), *The Lonely Crowd: A Study of the Changing American Character* (New Haven; Yale University Press, 1950); C. Wright Mills, *White Collar: The American Middle Classes* (1951) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); William H. Whyte, *Organization Man* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1956); Vance Packard, *The Hidden Persuaders* (1957), 2nd edn. (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981); Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (1964), 2nd edn. (London: Routledge, 2002).

however, Sexton's description of the daily regime – with its emphasis on the oppressive regulation of the patient body – evokes the images of displaced and interned populations that emerged towards the end of the Second World War, and speaks, therefore, to growing fears about 'mass society' and its eminent vulnerability to totalitarian forms of control.[33] When read alongside Sexton's reference to 'the shibboleth' – a Hebrew word which was used by Jephthah, King of the Gileadites, to distinguish his own men from his enemies – the restrictive, moribund environment of the asylum and its foreclosure of autonomous behaviours seems in some way reminiscent of the Nazi concentration camp.[34] Interestingly, these historical anchors are also present in another of Sexton's institution poems, 'Flee On Your Donkey' (1966), which I mentioned briefly earlier. Here, Sexton integrates the speaker's claim to Jewishness into a description of the dull and regulated dimensions of life in the institutional panopticon. The speaker, once a 'third-grader / with a blue star on [her] forehead', imagines her 'bachelor analyst' as the consummate totalitarian; 'better than Christ', he is 'the new God, / the manager of the Gideon Bible' who 'promised [her] another world / to tell me who / I was'. Trading on populist constructions of the dictator-as-prophet, Sexton shows how the analyst presides over, and displaces, conventional systems of belief (represented here in the form of the Gideon Bible).[35] Extending the authoritarian metaphor further, Sexton gives over the speaker's identity to the analyst, in relation to whose interpretation she is defined: it is he who is able to 'tell' her who she was and is. Moreover, in

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[33] See Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951), 3rd edn. (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1967); Erich Fromm, *Escape From Freedom* (1941) (New York: Owl Books, 1994); William Kornhauser, *The Politics of Mass Society* (1960) (London: Routledge, 1998); Jose Ortega Y Gasset, *The Revolt of the Masses* (1932) (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1964).

[34] According to the *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, 'shibboleth' is 'the Hebrew word used by Jephthah as a test-word by which to distinguish the fleeing Ephraimites (who could not pronounce the *sh*) from his own men the Gileadites (Judges vii. 4-6).' This led to the mass slaughter of 42,000 Ephraimites. In a further permutation, 'shibboleth' is '[a] catchword or formula adopted by a party or sect, by which their adherents or followers may be discerned, or those not their followers may be excluded'. This seems to be especially pertinent to a discussion of conformity culture. See *Oxford English Dictionary Online* <http://www.oed.com>. [Accessed November 8 2006].

[35] See Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, p. 349, pp. 373-75.

this dictatorial mode, the analyst's potential to deliver the speaker to a new level of self-understanding is extrapolated into apocalyptically global terms as he promises her 'another world'.

Moving through the haunted landscape of alcoholics and suicides, the speaker is dulled by the monotony of the 'permanent guests' and the 'same ruined scene' of the 'sad hotel'. Like the institution in 'You, Doctor Martin', this 'sad hotel' not only constricts the freedom of the speaker through its hard regime, but also through its panoptical constitution. Throughout 'Flee On Your Donkey', the speaker is eminently vulnerable to observation from without, and the fear that attends this vulnerability is symbolized by the hornet, which, in Sexton's personal mythology, represented 'some terrible evil, some truth, that's always around when everything's all right'.[36] In this particular context, the hornets 'have been sent', and thus seem to operate in service to an unspecified, but powerful, authority. These hornets

hover outside, all knowing,
hissing: *the hornet knows*
I heard it as a child
But what was it that he meant?
The hornet knows!
What happened to Jack and Doc and Reggy?
Who remembers what lurks in the heart of man?
What did The Green Hornet mean, *he knows?*
Or have I got it wrong?
Is it The Shadow who had seen
me from my bedside radio?

By placing this shared emphasis on the acts of seeing and knowing, Sexton plays into Cold War concerns about privacy and surveillance. In this context, the eye is both the agency of sight and insight: with 'eyes shut on the confusing office, / eyes circling into my childhood, / eyes newly cut', the speaker attempts to 'see' herself. Likewise, what 'the hornet knows' is intimately linked to what The Shadow had 'seen' from the speaker's bedside radio. In this

[36] Middlebrook, p. 178

way, Sexton renders sight inextricable from both knowledge and power. By doing this within the space of an asylum poem, moreover, Sexton forges a specific link between surveillance practices and the notion of sickness: as the relentlessness of the speaker's self-analysis is symptomatic of psychic disturbance, so the government's investment in monitoring its own citizens comes to denote the onset of a similar, if social, malady.

10. The Politics of Self-Incrimination

In the context of Cold War cultural politics, communism was inexorably identified with the corruption of normative psychopathology. As early as 1947, ex-communist, Louis Budenz, cautioned that 'the ordinary American has no idea of the alien world [of communism]'. Its operations, moreover, could not 'be conveyed to a normal American mind'.[37] This devolution of the individual's political convictions into a matter of psychological health (or lack thereof) was seized upon and extrapolated by McCarthy, who, during his 1950 landmark speech at Wheeling, West Virginia, called for the expulsion of communists, those 'twisted, warped thinkers', from the systems of American government.[38] This rhetoric proved to be so powerful that it persisted well into the 1960s. In *None Dare Call it Treason* (1964), John Stormer describes communism as a 'disease of the intellect [promoting] universal brotherhood, peace and prosperity to lure humanitarians and idealists into participating in a conspiracy which gains power through deceit and deception and stays in power with brute force'.[39] The prevalence of these metaphors not only remarks the heightened currency of psychotherapeutic models of understanding in the years following the war, but also signals the extent to which these models were politicized in the fight against communism.

As the discourses of the Cold War were distinguished by a tendency to transpose political situations into psychological metaphors, so the reverse is true in Sexton's writing, in which political concerns are enacted under the symbolic dynamics of psychoanalytic therapy.

In 'Said the Poet to the Analyst', to which I referred earlier, the therapeutic paradigm

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[37] Louis Budenz, *This Is My Story*, (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company Inc., 1947). Also see Whitfield, p. 34.

[38] Joseph McCarthy, 'Communists in the State Department', Wheeling, West Virginia (February 20 1950). McCarthy's speech, which was openly concerned with the identification and eradication of communist influence from within the systems of American government, is reproduced on a number of internet sites. I have made reference to the version found on the history pages of the University of Wisconsin website. <http://www.us.history.wisc.edu/hist102/pdocs/mccarthy_wheeling.pdf>. [Accessed December 13 2006].

[39] John Stormer, *None Dare Call it Treason*, (Florissant, Missouri: Liberty Bell Press, 1964), p. 16.

superscribes Cold War anxieties about surveillance, conformity, and confessional discourses. Like 'You, Doctor Martin', 'Said the Poet to the Analyst' performs containment through its formal patterning and its approach to language, situating the word – as encapsulated in the symbol of the dead bee – as the most fundamental unit of containment. In addition, the poem gestures towards the necessity of conformity through the forced parallelism of its two stanzas, which match each other at a typographical level, and at the level of statement: the opening line of the first stanza, 'My business is words' is duplicated, with a shift of focus, in the second stanza, in which 'Your business is watching my words'. Like the speaker, then, the poem is under pressure to conform, to make itself coherent and consistent, and to mask its own, inevitable deviations.

> My business is words. Words are like labels,
> or coins, or better, like swarming bees.
> I confess I am only broken by the sources of things;
> as if words were counted like dead bees in the attic,
> unbuckled from their yellow eyes and their dry wings.
> I must always forget how one word is able to pick
> out another, to manner another, until I have got
> something I might have said . . .
> but did not.
>
> Your business is watching my words. But I
> admit nothing. I work with my best, for instance,
> when I can write my praise for a nickel machine,
> that one night in Nevada: telling how the magic jackpot
> came clacking three bells out, over the lucky screen.
> But if you should say this is something it is not,
> then I grow weak, remembering how my hands felt funny
> and ridiculous and crowded with all
> the believing money.

For Philip McGowan, 'Said the Poet to the Analyst' registers 'the disjunction between . . . two positions in language, analytic on one side and poetic on the other . . . matched by a

similar gap between what is said to the analyst and what is not, or cannot be said'.[40] While McGowan is correct to draw attention to the bifurcation of poetic and analytical approaches to language that govern the overarching logic of the poem, Sexton's engagement with this dialectic also maps out widespread political tensions that were emerging at the time – namely between the expressive individual and the structures of authority within which his or her expressions were contained and decoded. The high currency of language in the imagined confessional space of psychoanalysis does, after all, replicate the (actual) valorization of testimonial discourses as it occurred across legal, political, and social spheres in the initial phases of the Cold War. In the context of McCarthyism and the HUAC hearings, the act of confession became a gesture of patriotic allegiance that verified the speaker's compliance with the democratic regime.[41] Correspondingly, confession came to imply the presence of judicial machinery, and, particularly, the processes and execution of authoritative judgement. This threat of judgement overhangs 'Said the Poet to the Analyst', and accounts, in large part, for Sexton's ambivalent approach to testimonial speech acts within the text.

As I mentioned earlier, questions of authority are writ large in 'Said the Poet to the Analyst'. For the speaker, confession – and the concession to external analytical and authoritative modes of interpretation that it entails – is experienced specifically as physical vulnerability. Addressing the analyst, she warns that 'if you say this is something it is not, / then I grow weak'. In the opening stanza, moreover, Sexton formulates the linguistic exchange of psychoanalytic therapy as a unidirectional process of visual observation over which the speaker-poet (as the object of this observation) has little or no control. By dissembling the act of psychical exposure into a metaphor based around optical dynamics – in

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[40] Philip McGowan, *Anne Sexton and Middle Generation Poetry: The Geography of Grief* (Westport, Connecticut and London: Praeger, 2004), p. 18.
[41] See Peter Brooks, *Troubling Confessions: Speaking Guilt in Law and Literature* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2000) and Fraser J. Harbutt, *The Cold War Era* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002).

which the analyst's role lies in 'watching' the poet's words – Sexton successfully evokes the authoritative structures of surveillance and judgement within which the speaker is caught.

Crucially, as McGowan has argued, Sexton's approach to confessional dialogue in 'Said the Poet to the Analyst' is defined in relation to the conjoined fears of misrepresentation and misinterpretation:

> The exchange of words between the analyst and the analysand is not a pure interchange of language in which everything that is said can be deemed to be a truthful statement. The duplicity of language and the slippages of meaning and intention, of circumstance and contingent need that enter the communicative process ensure the impossibility of such an uncompromised interchange. Indeed, it could be argued that 'the ultimate goal of language acquisition is to lie effectively … real lying … is the deliberate use of language as a tool … to mislead the listener'.[42]

Sexton's recognition of the potential of language to constrict and distort meaning is counterweighted, to some extent, by the mutual investment of the speaker and the analyst in its communicative function. As McGowan argues, when the speaker comes to delineate her relationship to language, she has no option other than to do so within the terms of language, encountering 'the impossible task of describing language in anything other than language itself: to describe what a word is requires the use of other words which, rather than aiding in the process of articulation, removes the wished-for idea of language further from the possibility of its articulation'.[43] The speaker's attempts to describe her poetic relation to language are, therefore, thwarted by the limits of language itself. In accordance with the poem's persistent interrogation of language, Sexton's speaker is permanently gesturing towards the unbreachable distance between the word and the world through the self-conscious and self-reflexive strategies of metaphor, simile, and repetition, which throw further emphasis on the irreconcilability of the real and the symbolic. In the first stanza, for

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[42] McGowan, p. 19.
[43] McGowan, p. 18.

example, 'Words are like labels, / or coins, or better, like swarming bees' [emphasis added]. According to these lines, words can only 'manner' the complexities of psychic experience in ways that are crudely imitative, rather than accurately reflective. Here, each repetition of 'or' augurs a new attempt to refine previously articulated ideas, and signals the speaker's fear of being fixed, distorted, or objectified within the terms of symbolic representation.

According to Middlebrook, 'once [Sexton] had put a memory into words, the words were what she remembered'.[44] The logic of this conjecture, in which the sign eclipses the experience, is encapsulated in 'Said the Poet to the Analyst', in which the speaker is 'broken by the sources of things; / as if words were counted like dead bees in the attic, / unbuckled from their yellow eyes and their dry wings'. As the word expires, it paralyzes and entombs meaning. Here, the decaying insect eyes echo and pluralize the 'I' of the speaker, signalling the inherent resistance of (multiple) subjectivity to representation within the singularizing terms of language. Sexton further trades on the phonetic correspondence of 'eye' and 'I' in order to position the fragmented insect corpses ('unbuckled from their yellow *eyes*' [emphasis added]) as metaphors for a self that is fundamentally disengaged from, if crystallized within, the signifiers that construct it.

In accordance with the speaker's association of language with an undesirable and irreversible condition of fixity, words are repeatedly envisioned as material phenomena; they are no longer vocal-textual effects, but tangible artefacts like labels, coins, and swarming bees. Once spoken, then, the word is transformed into a phenomenal unit that is, like other objects, vulnerable to intense forms of (physical) scrutiny from without. This imaginative objectification of words within the space of the poem defines an approach to language that is consistent with that of psychoanalysis. If, as Grosz argues, 'psychoanalysis has nothing but the analysand's speech as its object, nothing but literary/linguistic procedures of

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[44] Middlebrook, p. 57.

interpretation, and no diagnostic or prognostic tools other than language', then Sexton, in 'Said the Poet to the Analyst', endeavours to illuminate this fact by literalizing language's 'objective' status.[45] For Sexton, the analysand's speech is not only the *intangible* 'object' of psychoanalysis, but also a *tangible* object, which can produce equally tangible consequences. These attempts to establish the materiality of words reflect anxieties about the increasingly objective status of language in the Cold War. In 1940, The Smith Act made language treasonable by incriminating those who 'knowingly or willingly advocate, abet, advise, or teach the duty, necessity, desirability, or propriety of overthrowing the Government of the United States or of any State by force or violence'.[46] In the culture of conformity, any discernible abnormality in word or deed could spell all sorts of trouble for the practitioner. In the psychoanalyst's office and the courtroom alike, speakers are incriminated, exculpated or judged primarily through their choice of (confessional) language.

In 'Live' (1966) Sexton again attempts to dissect the spurious synonymy of confession and truth through the analysis of the fractious relationship between language and reality. The final poem in 1966's Pulitzer Prize-winning *Live or Die* collection, 'Live' critiques the strategies and processes of self-disclosure. While identifying the rising currency of confession in 1960s America, Sexton expresses a general scepticism about the truth value that can be legitimately ascribed to this type of speech. Significantly, the epigraph of 'Live' is culled from Saul Bellow's epistolary novel, *Herzog* (1964), which charts the eponymous intellectual's assault upon the postwar tendency to explicate diverse phenomenon – including historical events, evolution, political culture, and personal disaster - within the restrictive frameworks of psychological thought.[47] This epigraph – 'Live or die, but don't poison

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[45] Elizabeth Grosz, *Jacques Lacan: A Feminist Introduction* (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 92.
[46] The Smith Act of 1940 is reproduced in a number of different print and online sources. Its relevant sections are quoted in full in Albert Fried, *McCarthyism: The Great American Red Scare: A Documentary History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 15.
[47] Saul Bellow, *Herzog* (London: Penguin, 2001).

everything' – not only invokes the spirit of postwar cynicism that so defines Bellow's novel, but pertinently casts the troubled psyche as an agent of social contamination.

'Live' is conspicuously framed by anxieties relating to the interlocking problematics of truth, confessional discourse, surveillance, contamination, and containment. While these issues inform a number of texts produced within the Cold War mien, Sexton's integrated use of legal rhetoric, psychoanalytic tropes, and poetic vocabulary – combined with her persistent attempts to complicate binary models of understanding through a deliberately contradictory use of language – marks this out as a particularly rich and allusive text.

As Nelson argues in *Pursuing Privacy in Cold War America*, 'Live' is best understood in relation to contemporaneous legal concerns over individual privacy rights, as a 'response to a sense of widespread and unavoidable surveillance'.[48] Certainly, 'Live' is critically underpinned by a legalistic approach to the classification of truth and confessional speech that is particularly tethered to Cold War systems of thought. It is equally concerned, however, with using the psychoanalytic scenario to illuminate the paradoxes of testimonial speech, and with foregrounding the fact that this type of discourse is only ever a 'dubious guide to the truth'. As Brooks explains in *Troubling Confessions*:

> [T]he confession itself may . . . be an avowal of dependency on and propitiation of the analyst. The need to confess speaks of guilt, certainly, but it does not speak the guilt. . . . For psychoanalysis, the claim of confession is necessarily of limited value and the object of suspicion, not a sure guide to the truth, and the test of voluntariness an utterly misleading criterion. The true confession may lie most of all in the resistance to confession.[49]

In the psychotherapeutic model, then, truth is not the inevitable teleological outcome of confessional praxis. Rather, truth has an infinite number of permutations – factual truth, emotional truth, the truth of self-identity – which are often radically discontinuous with one

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[48] Nelson, p. 91.
[49] Brooks, *Troubling Confessions*, p. 117.

another; 'truth', therefore, is only ever the contestable product of a series of subjective decisions. Still, the modern sense of truth is inexorably identified with the confession, which signals that the quest for truth is in process. While psychoanalysis is attuned to, and reliant upon, the oxymoronic status of confessional truth, political and judicial systems are forced to operate in relation to a more rigid definition, in which truth is something verifiable that can be upheld by external forms of corroboration:

> When the law intervenes, or perhaps more accurately, when the law opens itself to admission of such confessional discourse . . . there is at least a risk that the kind of truth produced by confession will be misconstrued, or given a factual existence whereas its true nature may be more accurately described as emotional. If confessional discourse might at first glance seem to be the most personal and honest an individual is capable of, its honesty, its intimacy, its truth to the self don't necessarily always conform to the truth of the external world, the truth of fact.[50]

While for Brooks, the misreading of literary or psychoanalytic testimonies as 'true' confessions represents a 'dangerous category error', this automatic ascription of a legally qualifiable truth value to the confessional statement (irrespective of its contextual specificities) is a defining feature of political and judicial procedures throughout the Cold War years, and one on which Sexton's poetry – and the following poem, 'Live' – repeatedly trades.[51]

Well, death's been here
for a long time –
it has a hell of a lot
to do with hell
and suspicion of the eye
and the religious objects
and how I mourned them
when they were made obscene
by my dwarf-heart's doodle.

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[50] Brooks, p. 141.

[51] The importance of confession in the context of the Cold War is highlighted repeatedly by a number of theorists. See Harbutt, Whitfield, and Nelson.

In light of my previous discussion of the rise of surveillance culture in postwar American society, I would like, in this first instance, to focus my analysis of 'Live' upon Sexton's reference to 'suspicion', which is distinctly locatable in terms of Cold War paranoia. Like 'You, Doctor Martin' and 'Said the Poet to the Analyst', 'Live' is underwritten by a sense of exposure – an acute sensitivity to one's vulnerability to external forms of observation. Again, this sense of exposure is inscribed through references to the eye, or, in this case, to the 'suspicion of the eye'. Rupturing the monosyllabic patterning and assonantal cohesion that Sexton sustains for the first four lines, 'suspicion of the eye' is posited, somewhat illogically, as the cause of the speaker's grim awareness of death's (metaphorical) presence. Already problematic in terms of its ostensible irrelevance to the speaker's morbid preoccupations, then, this line is rendered more ambiguous by Sexton's opaque phraseology. At the most fundamental level, 'the eye' is peculiarly disengaged from any sort of body – there is no possessive pronoun to designate its embodied location or the relationship of its projected gaze to the speaker. This lack of specificity allows for the possibility that 'the eye' is intended to be read metonymically, to signify an awareness of divine, social, or political surveillance. In a similar vein, 'suspicion' lacks even the most basic unit of linguistic contextualization – the definite article – and in this way both 'the eye', and the act of 'suspicion', become dangerously free-floating: mobile, plural, and infinitely transferable.

Within the broader context of the poem, the 'suspicion of the eye' anticipates and reflects the speaker's broader suspicions regarding the confessional 'I', which is ascribed a truth-value that it can only ever fail to fulfil.

> I kept right on going on,
> a sort of human statement,
> lugging myself as if
> I were a sawed-off body
> in the trunk, the steamer trunk.
> This became a perjury of the soul.
> It became an outright lie

and even though I dressed the body
it was still naked, still killed.

Through the speaker's dual location of herself first as 'a human statement' and then as 'a sawed-off body' Sexton foregrounds the confluence of body and text that takes place in 'Live'. As 'a sort of human statement', the speaker is the product of various textual components and not, it seems, a 'real' being. If, however, selfhood is purely textual, then that which cannot be inscribed into this 'human statement' is, inadvertently, abjected from the speaker's 'knowable' identity. The confusion of the corporeal and the textual, of reality and representation, and of truth and lies that Sexton stages in 'Live' dramatizes some of the tensions and deceptions that she identifies with the practice of confessional poetry:

> All poets lie. Yet it is our function to try to tell the truth. The attempt to do this is what I call a poem. As I said once in a poem, 'a writer is essentially a crook. With used furniture he makes a tree'. What I have tried to do is to make the non-verbal verbal; to make a section of my life an entity – a something on a page.[52]

The attempt to 'make a section of [her] life an entity' is literalized in the metaphor of the 'sawed-off body', which is comprised of the same matter as a corporeal 'entity', but which is only, necessarily, a dismembered fragment, a 'section' of the self. In the translation of the 'non-verbal' into the 'verbal', the grotesque spectacle of the 'sawed-off body' and the 'human statement' come to gesture towards the surplus of the 'non-verbal', which – like the Lacanian real – can never be conveyed by verbal means. For this reason, the 'human statement' and 'the sawed-off body' dissolve into a 'perjury of the soul' – they lie by not telling the whole truth of the self. Sexton further alludes to the deceptive dimensions of language through an increasingly speculative rhetoric. This rhetoric is based around the deployment of similes and partial metaphors, in which the speaker tentatively self-identifies

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[52] Anne Sexton, Statement for the Poetry Book Society. HRHRC, Box 16, Folder 4.

as 'a *sort of* human statement, / lugging myself as if / I were a sawed-off body' [emphasis added]. As the stanza develops, the 'sawed-off body', like the body of the confessional text itself, becomes nominally disengaged from the speaker: she experiences her physicality as a rogue 'it'; as '*the* body' – a body that no longer falls under her express jurisdiction [emphasis added]. This loss of control is further symbolized in the legal vocabulary to which Sexton takes recourse in this same stanza. This legal-judicio vernacular might, I would like to argue, be constructively rethought not only alongside the 'Supreme Court's anxieties about privacy', as Nelson suggests, but also, more specifically, in relation to the HUAC hearings.[53] By configuring the speaker as a 'human statement', Sexton not only foregrounds the inextricability of the confessional mode from legalistic assessments of truth-value, but replaces the body of the speaker with a body of confessional text. It is the speaker's self-statements, therefore, and not the 'truth' of her embodied (and hence automatically inexpressible) existence by which the contours of her identity are publicly established. In this way, then, the 'human statement' collapses into a 'perjury of the soul', 'an outright lie' – the speaker's inevitable violation of the terms of her confessional engagement.

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[53] Nelson, p. 91.

11. The Threat of Contamination and the Rhetoric of Sickness

As I have already indicated, many theorists have pointed to the distinction between 'American' and 'Un-American' behaviours as the defining feature of the postwar conformity culture. Equally, this distinction has been usefully and frequently linked to the inside/outside tension on which the ideology of containment – with its politics of extant isolationism – is predicated. While these various oppositions (between inside and outside, American and Un-American) are, of course, well established within the field of American political studies, I am here interested specifically in the ways in which this binary logic impresses itself upon Cold War cultural discourses, and how these discourses, in turn, come to influence Sexton's writing.

The binarism to which I am referring is clearly at work within the metaphorical manoeuvres of Cold War rhetoric, in which threats to the nation's political security (and that of communism in particular) were routinely decomposed into symbols of disease and contamination. In Ross's view, the prevalence of the disease paradigm testifies to its versatility: with slight modifications, it could be used to describe either of the two major security risks that containment was intended to minimize:

> The first speaks to a threat outside of the social body, a threat that therefore has to be excluded, or isolated in quarantine, and kept at bay from the domestic body. The second meaning of containment, which speaks to the domestic contents of the social body, concerns a threat internal to the host which must then be neutralized by being fully absorbed.[54]

Within the 'body' of Sexton's poetry, the social and domestic fears about infiltration, contamination, and destruction that characterized the Cold War era, and to which Ross here gestures, are obsessively played out upon and within the bodies of Sexton's *dramatis*

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[54] Ross, p. 46.

personae. As we have seen in 'Live', the female body, which Sexton so determinedly configures as a disorderly and diseased organism, is regularly disposed as a metaphor for the confessional project. In this metaphor, the 'text', like many of the bodies in Sexton's work, is plagued by germs of doubt which compromise its sense of itself as pure, authentic, and whole. Sexton's treatment of the body – and the female body in particular – also, however, speaks to specific contemporaneous concerns about what was, in the hands of the United States government, the most dangerous foe that Cold War Americans were likely to face: the enemy within.

The concept of the 'enemy within' had a great deal of currency during the Cold War years; it was, in Whitfield's analysis, a threat which 'literature, movies, art, and the media – particularly the new force, television, consistently hammered [home]'.[55] This theme, of course, had been at the heart of Senator Joseph McCarthy's era-defining speech at Wheeling, West Virginia, in which, paraphrasing the philosopher Will Durant, he advised the nation that when a 'great democracy is destroyed, it will not be from enemies from without, but rather because of enemies from within'.[56] As Nelson explains, the Cold War notion of the 'enemy within' was possessed of 'an unanticipated rhetorical flexibility' that worked to the advantage of political conservatism:

> This formulation [the enemy within] could describe the communist in the State Department or the homosexual on the job; it could by the early sixties describe labor unions (Robert Kennedy's *Enemy Within* [1960]) or suicide (Edward Robb Ellis's *The Traitor Within* [1961]). . . . This rhetorically flexible characterization of the enemy served to both multiply the sites of invasion, dispersing them across U.S. social and political life, as well as intensify them, extending surveillance deeper into regions that did not then appear to be political, such as gender, sexuality, mental health, and personality.[57]

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[55] Whitfield, p. vii. See also Harbutt, p. 78.
[56] See McCarthy.
[57] Nelson, p. 11.

The rhetorical flexibility to which Nelson here gives thought is repeatedly demonstrated in Sexton's work, where the 'enemy within' is deployed as a metaphor for the destructive side of the divided self. This usage is clearly evidenced in 'Rumpelstiltskin', from *Transformations*, which opens with the following prologue:

> Inside many of us
> is a small old man
> who want to get out.
> No bigger than a two year old
> whom you'd call lamb chop
> yet this one is old and malformed.
> His head is okay
> But the rest of him wasn't Sanforized.
> He is a monster of despair.
> He is all decay.
> He speaks up as tiny as an earphone
> with Truman's asexual voice:
> I am your dwarf.
> I am the enemy within.
> I am the boss of your dreams.
> No. I am not the law in your mind,
> the grandfather of watchfulness.
> I am the law of your members,
> the kindred of blackness and impulse.
> See. Your hand shakes.
> It is not palsy or booze.
> It is your Doppelgänger.

Like Cold War characterizations of the 'enemy within', the threat that Sexton describes in 'Rumpelstiltskin' is clouded by ambiguity: within the successive propositions of the opening stanza it is variously and disjunctively cast as a pathological, political, and psychological peril. In the first instance, this 'enemy within' is configured as a dwarfish 'monster of despair' – the stunted personification of an unstable humanity that is resistant to containment, 'trying to get out'. Endowed with the 'asexual voice' of Harry S. Truman, however, the enemy assumes a distinctly political, conservative cast. Immediately identifiable with the inception of the Cold War and, more particularly, the climate of containment, surveillance

and McCarthyite hysteria to which it gave rise, Truman functions as a metonym for political paranoia. While these referential vectors work to align the conflicted body politic to the conflicted body proper, the ventriloquization of Trumanite discourse (and the voice's self-identification as 'the enemy within') works to imply the inherence – the true *withinness* – of the forces that threaten to destabilize political, and ontological, integrity. Despite the necessity of its containment, the 'enemy within' is described in terms of its legitimacy; it is the 'boss of your dreams', 'the law of your members'. Thus conflating totalitarian and democratic models of social organization (the former being discernible within the autocratic 'boss of your dreams' and the latter in the constitutional 'law of your members') Sexton collapses the supposed polarity of these discrete modes of government and thus naturalizes the 'enemy within': it is no longer a hostile force that has insinuated itself into otherwise laudable socio-political structures; it is, rather, a threat that is always and already seeded within the structures themselves. The political legitimacy which Sexton here extends to the destructive 'enemy within' is rendered all the more emphatic as this enemy mutates into an explicitly psychological threat. Recast as 'the kindred of blackness and impulse', the 'enemy within' becomes eerily reminiscent of the Freudian id; the nucleus of our most primitive impulses and desires that is held in necessary abeyance by the repressive mechanisms of the ego.[58] Partly as a result of the triadic models of the mind advanced by Freud, and later Lacan, the divided status of the human subject has been a creative mainstay of theorists, writers, and artists throughout the twentieth century. I would like to suggest that Sexton's 'Rumpelstiltskin' might be interestingly reread alongside these models of conflicted subjectivity, and, particularly, alongside Lacan's concept of the *corps morcelé*, or the

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[58] See Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), *The Essentials of Psycho-Analysis*, ed. and trans. by James Strachey and Others (London: Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1986), pp. 218-68 and 'The Ego and the Id' (1923), *The Essentials of Psycho-Analysis*, ed. and trans. by James Strachey and Others (London: Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1986), pp. 439-83.

'fragmented body'.[59] While the *corps morcelé* marks a resurgence of the subject's earliest memories of *embodied* discord, its fragmented status is deliberately evocative of, and inextricable from, the divided *symbolic* subject. As Malcolm Bowie summarizes, the 'body once seemed dismembered, all over the place, and the anxiety associated with this memory fuels the individual's desire to be the possessor and the resident of a secure bodily "I"'.[60] In 'Rumpelstiltskin', then, the insistent repetition of 'I am' establishes the subject's location within the symbolic order, while also signalling the divided status of that subject – the 'I', after all, designates a fraction of Rumpelstiltskin's being, and not the whole. Furthermore, by engaging that 'I' in an imaginary 'dialogue' with a second person (the implied reader) who is actually only another fraction of the self to which the 'I' ostensibly refers, Sexton works to galvanize the model of the self-in-conflict on which the poem turns. More pressingly, however, this statistical distancing of the 'enemy within' from the conscious faculties of the subject serves to render it uncanny, and thus increases the threat that it seems to present, while simultaneously underscoring the necessity of its containment.

While biology and politics have long been rhetorical bedfellows, their discursive alliance was newly consolidated in the Cold War era when disease became a staple metaphor for communism, its spread, and its effects. For John Stormer in *None Dare Call it Treason* (1964), communism was 'a disease of the intellect'[61], while for the Republican Robert Welch, the 'cancer of collectivism' had the potential to destroy global political stability.[62] Adopting an identical strategy of biologization, Frederick L. Schumann argued

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[59] Malcolm Bowie, *Lacan* (London; Fontana Press, 1991), p. 26.
[60] Bowie, p. 26.
[61] John Stormer, *None Dare Call it Treason* (Cutchogue, New York: Buccaneer Books, 1990), p. 16.
[62] Robert Welch, *The Blue Book of the John Birch Society*, 21st edn. (Boston: Western Islands Publishers, 1961). Alternatively, see entry on 'The John Birch Society', *PRA: The Website of Political Research Associates*, <http://www.publiceye.org/tooclose/jbs.html>. [Accessed January 20 2006].

that '[u]nderneath their skin, communism and liberalism are blood brothers'.[63] Within the American cultural imagination, then, the co-ordinates of the communist threat were insistently mapped out upon the discursive landscape of pathogenic contamination.[64] As Susan Sontag observes in *Illness as Metaphor* (1978), the 'melodramatics of the disease metaphor in modern political discourse assume a punitive notion: of the disease not as a punishment but as a sign of evil, something to be punished'.[65] This version of the metaphor is demonstrated in one of Sexton's uncollected poems, dated December 4, 1967 – the day on which New York played host to major protests against the Vietnam War.[66] It is here, again, that Sexton deploys the rhetoric of war to describe the divided topography of the diseased subject. Having abandoned her 'war with sin', the speaker laments the persistence of evil: 'the old sense of evil remains, / evil that wife. / Evil who leaves me here, / most days, / dead broke'. Eventually, the speaker lays claim to evil as her 'other face, / grunting as I sigh, / vomiting as I chew', and moves towards a final understanding of its – or her – capacity to bring about destruction from within:

> Take adultery or theft.
> Merely sins.
> It is evil who dines on the soul,
> stretching its long bone tongue.
> It is evil who tweezers my heart,
> Picking out its atomic worms.

While the threat of destruction casts an ominous shadow over the psychic landscape of poems such as this, the precise co-ordinates of this threat remain enigmatically – and, I would like to

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[63] Frederick L. Schulman qtd. in Arthur Herman, *Joseph McCarthy: Re-examining the Life and Legacy of America's Most Hated Senator* (New York: The Free Press, 1999), p 58.
[64] Anecdotally, the extent to which this particular Cold War metaphor prevailed upon Sexton's interpretation of personal – and explicitly physiological – experience is indicated in a letter to her daughter, Linda, in which she refers to her menses as 'the little communist friend'. See Anne Sexton in a letter to Linda Gray Sexton, (undated). HRHRC, Box 25, Folder 7.
[65] Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor and AIDS and Its Metaphors* (1978; 1989) (London: Penguin, 2002), p. 81.
[66] See Anne Sexton in the poem beginning 'I am no longer at war with sin . . .' in *Words for Dr. Y: Uncollected Poems with Three Stories* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1978), p. 23.

suggest, intentionally – obscure to the reader. In this respect, Sexton's work repeats the vague and flexible constructions of the Cold War 'enemy within' towards which Nelson signals. Although I intend to excavate the nature of this threat more thoroughly in my forthcoming analysis, I would like, for the moment, to point to the frequency with which Sexton's speakers are terrorized by agencies of destruction that might be classified as 'internal' – agencies, that is, which appear to be conjured from within the physical – and psychical – perimeters of the speakers' selves. Certainly, in Sexton's most interesting 'threat' poems, the sense of menace does not derive solely from the hostile contagions that circulate within the fictional bodies of the speakers. Rather, these pathogenic threats are radically offset by the violent authority of the external, human agents who seek to identify and expunge these undesirable elements.

In 'The Operation', the speaker's symptomatography is assiduously plotted against that of her dead mother, who, as the reader is informed in the opening lines, has recently succumbed to cancer:

> After the sweet promise,
> the summer's mild retreat
> from mother's cancer, the winter months of her death,
> I come to this white office, its sterile sheet,
> its hard tablet, its stirrups, to hold my breath
> while I, who must, allow the glove its oily rape,
> to hear the almost mighty doctor over me equate
> my ills with hers
> and decide to operate.

While the tumour operates as a centrifugal image within the poem – from which the details of the medical encounter and the mother-daughter relationship spin out – it is never designated with any specificity; contributing, instead, to the ambiguous sense of menace that pervades 'The Operation'. More critically, however, the spectral threat of (self) annihilation with

which the poem is concerned is not singularly or uncomplicatedly encoded within the implied image of the tumour. Rather, as this threat is, simultaneously, locatable within a system of matrilineal inheritance, it necessarily exceeds – in some profound and mystifying way – the cellular swelling of the tumour and, moreover, the boundaries of individual biology. Transmitted across two generations of women, then, the threat of destruction comes, always and already, from within *and* without – being traceable at once to the tumescent tissues inside the speaker's own body, and to those outside of it, in the body of the mother. This leakage between the supposedly antagonistic principles of 'inside' and 'outside' is sustained by the poem's chronological fluxions, in which the discrete biological trajectories of mother and daughter are continually displacing one another, blurring the margins of singular subjectivity. In this opening stanza, mother and daughter converge within the shared space of the examination room and within the figure of the 'almost mighty doctor', whose diagnosis is the product of foreknowledge about the speaker's maternal ancestry. This entanglement is repeated at the level of the poem, where the pronominal forms of 'I' and 'my' are interspaced with those of 'her' and 'hers', as Sexton braids together the identities of mother and daughter in an intricate textual weave. Pertinently, Sexton's sustained interrogation of the prohibitive boundaries of personal subjectivity is concurrent with the 'oily rape' that takes place in this first stanza. In this way, the potential permeability of subjective identity is posited alongside, and augmented by, an image that stresses the eminent violability of the body's tangible borders. Continuing in this questioning vein, 'The Operation' segues into a nostalgic contemplation of the maternal anatomy, into which the speaker imaginatively, and retrogressively, projects herself:

> It grew in her
> as simply as a child would grow,
> as simply as she housed me once, fat and female.

Always my most gentle house before that embryo
of evil spread in her shelter and she grew frail.

Embedding her description of the spread of cancer in the benign diction of domesticity and maternity, Sexton obscures the precise nature of the danger that pervades the poem. The anaphoric repetition of 'as simply' works in tandem with the echoic couplings of 'grew'/'grow' and 'housed'/'house' to replicate acoustically the reproductive processes of cancer's terrible pregnancy. As in 'Housewife' and 'There You Were' the female body is configured as a domestic locus, the 'gentle house' within which the 'embryo of evil' has spread but by which it will be, it seems, contained. As this maternal frame withers away, the speaker architecturalizes the terms of her own embodiment:

Automatically I get in my car,
knowing the historic thief
is loose in my house
and must be set upon.

Sexton's personification of the tumour as a 'historic thief' who 'must be set upon' is coincident with Sontag's interpretation of the way in which the disease metaphor operates in relation to modern political discourses; that is, as a 'sign of evil, something to be punished'. As the poem draws to a close, it appears that this punishment has been administered, with 'evil' being successfully exiled from the 'house' of the speaker's body:

All's well, they say. They say I'm better.
I lounge in frills or, picturesque,
I wear bunny pink slippers in the hall.
I read a new book and shuffle past the desk
to mail the author my first fan letter.
Time now to pack this humpty-dumpty
back the frightened way she came
and run along, Anne, and run along now,
my stomach laced up like a football

for the game.

As the speaker 'must . . . allow the glove its oily rape' in the opening stanza, so she reluctantly concedes to the final authority of medical judgment in these concluding lines. The official prognosis, though favourable, is radically subverted by the speaker's sceptical repetition of 'they say', which registers an important disjunction between professional opinion and that of the speaker, around whose body these theories circulate. With each 'they say', the speaker's sense of jurisdiction over her own body diminishes, and her capacity to feel, interpret and articulate physical experience declines. Reverting to a garish parody of femininity in 'frills' and 'bunny pink slippers', the speaker strives to conform to the role of recovering patient. Considered within the context of Cold War Americanism, then, the final lines of 'The Operation' seem to constitute something of a conformist denouement. Not only does the speaker clothe herself in the lurid apparel of traditional femininity, but she stresses the vulnerability of her body to external forms of violence through reference to American football – an aggressive, competitive game that has strong associations with patriotism, conservatism and cultural orthodoxy.[67]

Militating against the logic of containment through its repeated symbolization of leakages between the borders of 'inside' and 'outside', 'The Operation' also, by extension, stages a crisis of subjectivity, in which the distinct figures of the speaker and the mother are periodically convergent. It is my view that this crisis might be constructively re-examined alongside Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection, in which she interprets anxieties about

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[67] As Todd Boyd argues, it is 'important to point out that both baseball and football are almost uniquely American in their appeal and in their cultural representation. . . . When most people outside of America refer to football they are, of course, referring to the game known in America as "soccer." Therefore, American football is almost exclusively American, and it in no way has any appeal outside of America. In keeping with the military emphasis, American football is especially xenophobic in the way that it assumes an almost exclusively American disposition'. See Todd Boyd, *Young Black Rich and Famous: The Rise of the NBA, the Hip Hop Invasion and the Transformation of American Culture* (New York: Doubleday, 2003), pp. 10-11.

containment (in its broadest sense) through reference to the psychoanalytical models of subjective development proposed by Freud and Lacan.

In *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva uses the concept of abjection to illuminate her analysis of the processes by which subjective and symbolic identities are generated within the social world. For Kristeva, the development of individual subjectivity is contingent upon the abjection of the maternal body – that is, a separation from, and exclusion of, the object which made existence possible. By way of this formative severance, the subject is able to enter the symbolic order and demarcate, in accordance with this order's ruling principles of division and exclusion, the lines of his or her own identity. It is in this critical instant of (maternal) rupture, Kristeva proposes, that the subject first experiences abjection. Gesturing towards an ontological state that predates the development of individual identity and the subject's investiture into the symbolic order, the abject 'neither gives up nor assumes a prohibition, a rule, or a law; but it turns them aside, misleads, corrupts; uses them, takes advantage of them, the better to deny them'.[68] Revealing as it does the illusory status of the distinctions that structure symbolic law, the abject dissolves the borders of subjective identity and unsettles the systems of differentiation by which we make sense of the world. Through the translucid membrane of the abject, then, the subject can glimpse at the silhouette of a pre-objectal, pre-symbolic world, and thus at a state of being that is anterior to, and inassimilable to, symbolic economies that are structured around distinctions between inside and outside, self and other:

> We may call it a border; abjection is above all ambiguity. Because, while releasing a hold, it does not radically cut off the subject from what threatens it – on the contrary, abjection acknowledges it to be in perpetual danger. . . . Abjection preserves what existed in the pre-objectal relationship, in the immemorial violence with which a body becomes separated from another body in order to be – maintaining that night in which the outline of the signified thing vanishes and where only the imponderable affect is carried out.[69]

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[68] Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. by Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), p. 15.
[69] Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, pp. 9-10.

Rendering proximate the stuff of 'pre-objectal' existence, abjection endangers the integrity of the subject, and thus all systems of meaning. As Barbara Creed elaborates:

> The place of the abject is where meaning collapses, the place where I am not. The abject threatens life, it must be radically excluded from the place of the living subject, propelled away from the body and deposited on the other side of an imaginary border which separates the self from that which threatens the self'.[70]

Sexton's poetry often seems to haunt this miasmic plain of the abject, in which the fragile borders of subjectivity are rendered threateningly immanent. The irruption of subjective boundaries that Kristeva places at the heart of her theorization of abjection is a consistent feature of 'The Double Image', one of Sexton's most lauded poems. Foregrounding the depth and delicacy of maternal relationships, this poem chronicles the speaker's experience of separation from her infant daughter, as set against the backdrop of her own suicide attempts and the onset of her mother's cancer. From the outset, mother and daughter are powerfully symmetrized in the 'double image' of the title, which refers to the poem's organizing motif of the two portraits – one of the speaker, one of her mother – that 'hang on opposite walls' in the parental home, constituting 'the cave of the mirror, / that double woman who stares / at herself, as if she were petrified / in time'. In the 'cave of the mirror', the lines of individual identity dematerialize as mother and daughter merge within the figure of the 'double woman'. What I have already hinted at in my analysis of 'The Operation', and what I would like to suggest with reference to 'The Double Image', is that the representation of the mother-daughter relationship poses a direct challenge to the idea of containment by speaking to concerns about the limits and excesses of subjective – and even physiological – identity. This problem of *excess*, by which I mean the point at which the self cannot contain itself (as may

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[70] Barbara Creed, *Horror and The Monstrous Feminine: An Imaginary Abjection* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 65.

be configured in terms of physical, psychical, or symbolic spillages), particularly inflects Sexton's depictions of maternity. For Sexton, as for others, it is as if the twinned conditions of motherhood and daughterhood embody the notion of an exchange that outstrips the apparatus of conventional signification. It is these themes of exchange and excess that Adrienne Rich touches upon in *Of Woman Born*, in which she proposes that the dynamics of the mother-daughter relationship subvert, in the most fundamental way, the structures of the symbolic order:

> Mothers and daughters have always exchanged with each other – beyond the verbally transmitted lore of female survival – a knowledge that is subliminal, subversive, preverbal: the knowledge flowing between two alike bodies, one of which has spent nine months inside the other.[71]

By placing the (diseased) bodies of mother and daughter at the heart of 'The Double Image', Sexton usefully foregrounds the idea that there exists a 'subliminal', *unrepresentable* traffic between parent and child that is borne out of their 'preverbal' connection. The illness metaphor, as well as the systems of genetic exchange that it presupposes, can thus be read as an attempt by Sexton to provide a tangible correlative for the immaterial flows of knowledge that pass between mother and child – those flows which are necessarily inassimilable to conventional signifying economies. Even so, in 'The Double Image' it is only the broad *concept* of non-verbal transaction, and not its dynamic specificities, that the biological referents work to reflect; the content and the precise nature of these exchanges remain shrouded in mystery, inherently resistant to figuration within the rationalizing structures of language.

Unlike Rich, Sexton approaches the concept of maternal exchange with some ambivalence; while she too advances a model through which to analyse the subliminal

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[71] Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (London: Virago Press, 1977), p. 220.

interactions that take place between mother and child, it is one that is fuelled entirely by anxieties about containment and contamination:

> I, who chose two times
> to kill myself, had said your nickname
> the mewling months when you first came;
> until a fever rattled
> in your throat and I moved like a pantomime
> above your head. Ugly angels spoke to me. The blame,
> I heard them say, was mine. They tattled
> like green witches in my head, letting doom
> leak like a broken faucet;
> as if doom had flooded my belly and filled your bassinet,
> an old debt I must assume.

Despite the firm location of these 'ugly angels' within the 'head' of the speaker, the sense of dread that they generate is, from the outset, uncontainable. While this uncontainability is expressed at a descriptive level through the 'broken faucet' imagery and repeated references to leaks and flooding, it is also reflected at an auditive level: the protracted vowel sounds in 'doom', 'leak', 'faucet', 'flooded', and 'filled' threaten to subsume the consonants by which they are (acoustically) contained. Similarly, Sexton's reification of the speaker's emotional disturbance in the figure of the doom-flooded pregnant body identifies the excessiveness of psychic experience – an excessiveness that is registered in its influence upon physiological processes.

> They hung my portrait in the chill
> north light, matching
> me to keep me well.
> Only my mother grew ill.
> She turned from me, as if death were catching,
> as if death transferred,
> as if my dying had eaten inside of her.
> That August you were two, but I timed my days with doubt.
> On the first of September she looked at me
> and said I gave her cancer.

They carved her sweet hills out
and still I couldn't answer.

Acknowledging the matrilineal cycle of sickness and death in which she and her female kin are locked, the speaker resorts to a diction that is pregnant with allusions to disease. The semantic unit 'ill' echoes throughout the stanza in 'chill', 'hills', and 'still', expressing the insidiousness with which sickness spreads within and across biological borders. Moreover, the alliterative cluster of 'my', 'matching', 'me', and 'mother', pitched alongside the sibilance of the final few lines of this stanza, gestures towards a system of communication that is not entirely significatory, but which is also, in Rich's words, 'subliminal [and] subversive'.[72] If, as many prominent feminist theorists have argued, the use of poetic language partakes in an action that is both regressive and 'maternal', then 'The Double Image' would seem to be a poem in which, to quote Judith Butler, the 'coherent, signifying subject [dissolves] into the primary continuity which is the maternal body'.[73] Through patterns of rhyme, rhythm, and repetition that indicate an uncontrollable resurgence of the semiotic within the structures of signification by disturbing 'the norms of the smooth "readerly" text', Sexton points to a desire to remain *uncontained*, to retain a link to the body of the mother.[74] Where this body is lost at a material level, then, withering away with the spread of the cancer, it is, in some sense, recovered at the level of the text, within the comforting acoustical manoeuvres of the poetry itself.

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[72] Rich, *Of Woman Born*, p. 220.
[73] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990) (London: Routledge, 1999), p. 106.
[74] Elizabeth Grosz, *Jacques Lacan: A Feminist Introduction* (London: Routledge, 1990), pp. 152-53.

12. Fear, Violence, and Female Embodiment

Just as the female body functions as a locus for anxieties about contamination in poems like 'The Operation' and 'The Double Image', it is also, simultaneously, a surface upon which Sexton plays out Cold War concerns about disfigurement and genetic mutation that grew up in the wake of the nuclear atrocities at Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and subsequent scandals involving Thalidomide, DDT, and the bomb testing sessions in the Nevada desert. As Leslie Fiedler explains in his monograph, *Freaks: Myths and Images of the Secret Self* (1978), these concerns found their most lucid postwar expression in American comic books like *The Fantastic Four* and *The Hulk*, in which the main protagonists tended to develop special powers on account of their exposure to various chemical, and even nuclear, experiments. Such fears about new, and potentially destructive, technologies are similarly reflected in Sexton's poetry, in which the bodies of female speakers are subjected to repeated transformations – transformations that also speak to emergent anxieties about psychopathological forms of deviance and the rise of minority politics. It is my view that these textual transformations might be productively reread alongside recent accounts of the freak – an identity that gained new currency in the radical political context of the 1960s. According to Rachel Adams in *Sideshow USA*, the postwar mainstreaming of marginal politics, as demonstrated in the expansion of the women's movement, the campaign for Civil Rights, and the protests against the war in Vietnam, gave rise to a climate of increased dissidence and diversity, in which the *freak* label was assumed electively by 'physiologically normal but dissident young people' to signal their disaffiliation from traditional norms and values:[75]

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[75] Leslie Fiedler, *Freaks: Myths and Images of the Secret Self* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1978), p. 14.

> No longer only a stigma marking those at the extreme margins of society, *freak* gained new centrality in the mouths of peaceniks, radicals, and activists. As a verb, *freak* became an activity that one could choose to perform or not, an identity which one could selectively embrace or put aside.[76]

This redefinition precipitated an inflation in the representational currency of freak identity, making it increasingly accessible as a metaphor for psychological and political disenfranchisement.

In the increasingly psychoanalytical context of postwar America, the freak was compellingly recast as an embodiment of the unconscious psyche. Fiedler, in particular, posits the freak as a 'secret self', a product of the unconscious drives that must be 'denied in the business of everyday living'.[77] Developing Fielder's provocative psychological model, Grosz has gone on to identify the freak's capacity to illustrate our collective 'fascination with the limits of our . . . identities as they are witnessed from the outside'. She goes on to suggest that 'the viewer's horror lies in the recognition that this monstrous image is at the heart of his or her own identity, for it is all that must be ejected or abjected from the self-image to make the bounded, category-obeying self possible'.[78] For Grosz, then, the freak forces a questioning of 'the structure of binary oppositions that govern our basic concepts and modes of self-definition'.[79] As the ordering principle of Western metaphysical space, the binary opposition organizes the systems of differentiation and signification through which we are identified as social beings. Crucially, as I stated earlier, the two terms of the binary opposition exist in a state of ineluctable asymmetry, being gendered and hierarchized in adherence to a scheme of masculine privilege. Again, as I have already mentioned, Irigaray argues that this systemic ideological and discursive devaluation of the feminine forecloses the

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[76] Rachel Adams, *Sideshow USA: Freaks and the American Cultural Imagination* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), p. 145.
[77] Fielder, pp. 314-15.
[78] Grosz, p. 65.
[79] Elizabeth Grosz, 'Intolerable Ambiguity,' *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body*, ed. by Rosemarie Garland Thomson (New York: New York University Press, 1996), pp. 55-66 (p. 57).

possibility of symbolizing female experience using conventional strategies of representation. For Irigaray, the femininity that appears within the existing symbolic order is a 'specular' femininity; produced through an inverted reflection of the masculine imaginary.[80] 'Authentic' femininity, if such a thing exists, cannot, then, 'be said to *be* anything,' but carries an excess that renders it inassimilable to existing binary economies.[81] Like the freak then, the female is destined to remain extrinsic to the realm of representation.

In the context of Sexton's poetry, the female body is repeatedly situated as a site of 'enfreakment'. I borrow the term *enfreakment* from David Hevey, in whose work it is used to denote the *processes* by which an individual comes to be classified as a freak.[82] With its nascent emphases on the mercurial and performative contours of identity, the concept of enfreakment provides an appropriate frame for the discussion of Sexton's attempts to establish the body as a politicized surface, and a nexus of social debate. Certainly, the types of enfreakment that Sexton stages in poems like 'Her Kind', 'Consorting with Angels', and 'Cripples and Other Stories' trade on the postwar political currency of the freak, seeking, as they do, to problematize traditional, prescriptive accounts of gender identity.

In 'Her Kind,' an early poem first published in 1958, Sexton explores femininity in terms of the unsystematizable excess to which Irigaray alludes, and endeavours to overcome the circumscriptions of a masculine linguistic mode through the spectacle of a plethoric female body. Interestingly, 'Her Kind' was Sexton's signature poem: if she was doing a public reading, this was the poem she always read first, telling the audience that it would establish 'what kind of woman she was, and what kind of poet'.[83] In each of the three stanzas, the speaker inhabits a different feminine identity – the witch (first stanza), the housewife

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[80] Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"*, (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 39.
[81] Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, p. 39.
[82] David Hevey, *The Creatures Time Forgot: Photography and Disability Imagery* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 53.
[83] Middlebrook, pp. 114-15.

(second stanza), and the woman facing death (third stanza). In a sense, then, 'Her Kind' is a poem in which Sexton rejects any singular account of *what a woman is*: women are not *either* good housewives *or* evil witches, and nor are they *either* active *or* passive. Rather, women are all these things at once: female identity is multiple, fluid, and open to change.

In the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the noun *kind* is defined as 'the character or quality derived from birth or native constitution . . . that which naturally belongs to or befits one'.[84] By inscribing this reference into the terms of her title, Sexton establishes this reading of identity as 'natural' and intrinsic as the poem's point of departure. What follows is not, however, commensurate with the singularizing claim of the title. Rather, within the space of three short stanzas, Sexton invokes not one, but three feminine typologies: the 'possessed witch,' the nurturing housewife, and the fallen woman. What is 'Her Kind' should, as a point of accuracy, be 'Her Kind*s*,' as the totalizing logic of the singular mode is repeatedly undercut by the pluralizing strategies of identification and representation that the poem sets forth:

> I have gone out, a possessed witch,
> haunting the black air, braver at night;
> dreaming evil, I have done my hitch
> over the plain houses, light by light:
> lonely thing, twelve-fingered, out of mind.
> A woman like that is not a woman, quite.
> I have been her kind.

Sexton's use of the incremental refrain, 'A woman like that . . . / I have been her kind,' subverts the thrust of its own taxonomical logic, as the idea of 'a woman like that,' of a 'her kind,' contravenes the poem's tacit codification of femininity as a diffuse, conflicting, and transitional condition.

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[84] See definition of 'kind' in the *Oxford English Dictionary Online* <http://www.oed.com>. [Accessed October 6 2005].

In Sexton's poetic mythology, the witch, like the writer, inhabits the peripheral and hidden zones of social space, and it is as a result of this remote situation that she is granted unique insight. In 'Her Kind,' the speaker's 'twelve-fingered' abundance approximates her unregulated psychic dexterity, and gestures towards an Irigarayan feminine excess that eludes linguistic thematization. By representing a female physiology that again exceeds its conventional boundaries, Sexton looks beyond the narrow horizons of orthodox femininity towards broader ontological vistas. In the final analysis, this attempt to destabilize the fixity of feminine identities is curtailed by the limiting order of language, a discursive machinery that is inimical to positive expressions of female identity and human ambiguity. Taking recourse in the binary structures in which 'her kind' are denied representation, the speaker can only define herself in relation to a 'woman' signifier from which she feels entirely alienated: 'A woman like that is not a woman, quite'. The failure of women to participate in the stylized presentation of abstract femininity is shown to incur a debt that can only be cleared by the partial surrender of gender status - hence the closing paradox in which the speaker is simultaneously 'a woman like that' and 'not a woman, quite'.

This ambivalent approach to gender is repeated, to some extent, in 'Consorting with Angels', a slightly later poem written in 1963.[85] Here, Sexton imagines a world beyond sexual difference, where the terms of bodily existence are open to perpetual (re)negotiation. Initially, however, the speaker is 'tired of the gender of things', and defects to a dreamscape that frustrates the tyrannical logic of binarism, and which is, instead, characterized by principles of flux and heterogeneity:[86]

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[85] 'Consorting with Angels' is now the title of Deryn Rees-Jones's study of modern women poets. See Deryn Rees-Jones, *Consorting With Angels: Essays on Modern Women Poets* (Tarset, Northumberland: Bloodaxe, 2005).

[86] See Linda Hutcheon, *The Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1988), pp. 58-59.

no two made in the same species,
one with a nose, one with a ear in its hand,
one chewing a star and recording its orbit,
each one like a poem obeying itself.

Resistant to the attenuating and scientific project of identification-through-classification, Sexton uses numerical figures ('one' and 'two') as noun substitutes, and eschews gender-specific pronouns altogether. The poem's evasive diction and synoptic disjunctions not only imitate the surreal operations of dream experience, but gesture towards the impossibility of representing ambiguous bodies within the binarized, non-neutral realm of inscriptional space.

In 'Consorting with Angels', the body functions as its own threshold into an unprecedented ontological state – a state that resists diagnosis, but is acknowledged by the speaker to be 'thoroughly inconsistent with the world of reason'. In this subrational sphere, the fraying gender parameters of 'Her Kind' have disintegrated, leaving the speaker 'not a woman anymore, / not one thing or the other'. Without a neutral 'house of language' in which to symbolize this ambiguous, de-sexualized position, the speaker can only offer a fractured account of embodied experience:[87]

I've been opened and undressed.
I have no arms or legs.
I'm all one skin like a fish.
I'm no more a woman
than Christ was a man

As I have already demonstrated, Sexton's poetics often intersect with major strands of feminist thought; particularly those which address the relationship between language and the female body. Returning to Irigaray's statement in *Speculum* that existing tools of discourse render women *unrepresentable*, I would like to propose that these closing lines of

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[87] Margaret Whitford in her introduction to Section II of *The Irigaray Reader*, ed. by Margaret Whitford (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), pp. 71-78 (p. 75).

'Consorting with Angels', stage another such intersection. In *Speculum*, Irigaray argues against Lacan's construction of the female according to an *a priori* principle of 'lack', and suggests that in order to understand what is 'specific to women', he would need a mirrored instrument – the speculum of the title – with which to 'see inside'.[88] In 'Consorting with Angels,' the speaker's description of being 'opened' and 'undressed' is suggestive of this desire to 'see inside'. Like Irigaray, however, Sexton is sceptical about the possibility of formulating female experience within a deterministic signifying practice. Sexton uses the spectacle of a mutative physicality to establish femininity as a fluctuating, inconsistent, and potentially subversive phenomenon, which demands new (possibly poetic) modes of expression. Ultimately, it is the enfreaked body that mobilizes the speaker's final claim to a neo-mythic transcendence, in which a feminine order of representation might begin to take root: she is 'no more a woman / than Christ was a man'.

In 'Cripples and Other Stories', from *Live or Die*, Sexton's speaker struggles to reconcile her emotional infirmity with an outwardly functioning, normative physiology. Written as an exploration of the 'strange process' of psychoanalytic therapy, 'Cripples and Other Stories' stages a conflict between the insatiate, destructive drives of the unconscious and the regulating forces of the repressive ego.[89]

In *Gender Trouble*, Butler mobilizes her interrogation of binary sex through reference to the surface politics of bodies, concluding that 'the figure of the interior soul, understood as "within" the body is signified through its inscription on the body, even though its primary mode of signification is through its very absence, its potent invisibility'.[90] This basic desire to bring body and soul into alignment through surface inscriptions is at the heart of 'Cripples

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[88] Margaret Whitford in her introduction to *The Irigaray Reader*, ed. by Margaret Whitford (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), pp. 1-15 (p. 6).
[89] Barbara Kelves, Interview with Anne Sexton, *No Evil Star: Selected Essays, Interviews, and Prose*, ed. by Steven E. Colburn (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1985), pp. 83-111 (p. 86).
[90] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 172.

and Other Stories', a poem in which the speaker traces her 'crippled' status not to the incident from which her deformity ensued, but to an anterior sense of her own psychical disfigurement: 'I knew I was a cripple. / Of course, I'd known it from the start'. It is in response to this formative insight that she transforms herself into 'an instant cripple' by crushing her hand between the cylinders of a mangle.

> The surgeons shook their heads.
> They really didn't know –
> Would the cripple inside of me
> be a cripple that would show?

The importance of *showing* or demonstrating one's abnormality is crucial here. As long as the cripple does not 'show' itself on the surface of the body, the speaker is refused recourse to a traumatic locus that might unravel the mystery of her psychological symptoms. Towards the close of the poem, the speaker laments the growth of her 'withered limb', and attempts to seek solace in a new mode of enfreakment:

> My cheeks blossomed with maggots.
> I picked at them like pearls.
> I covered them with pancake.
> I wound my hair in curls

Sexton's depiction of femininity as a superficial pretence, as something that is generated through the synthetic processes of covering and curling, places gender firmly in the register of performance. The 'appearance' of femininity is advanced as being always and already a process of enfreakment that takes place at the level of surface. While this socially admissible, 'feminizing' enfreakment is intended to disguise the blossoming 'maggots' of acne that signal the twin onset of sexual maturity and psychical decay, it only reduces her to a gaudy spectacle, a parody of the femininity that is already parodic.

While 'Cripples and Other Stories' addresses issues of gender and power through a small-scale examination of the relationship between femininity and various forms of self-inflicted violence, Sexton elsewhere explores these same issues through reference to large-scale political conflict. In an untitled poem, dated December 17, 1969, Sexton relocates a remote, military confrontation – the My Lai massacre, which occurred during the Vietnam War – to the space of the American home. In this poem, Sexton exploits the surrealistic operations of dream logic to collapse the remote into the proximate and foreground the inextricability of violence and patriarchal power. The poem's frame of political reference is designated in the opening line, with a reference to the Vietnamese village of My Lai – the site at which, in March 1968, a counterinsurgency mission executed by American troops degenerated into the mass slaughter, torture, and rape of unarmed Vietnamese citizens. As the massacre resulted in the deaths of hundreds of women, children and old people, the United States government was anxious to ensure that the incident remain clandestine, and not be used to fuel the political agenda of an already burgeoning American peace movement. In consequence, it was not until November 1969 – a couple of weeks before the stated composition date of Sexton's poem – that Ron Haeberle's photographs of butchered Vietnamese civilians were used to illustrate accounts of the carnage at My Lai in *Time*, *Life* and *Newsweek*. Printed alongside graphic reports of rape, sodomy, and sexual torture – Haeberle's images threw the gendered, violent and eroticized dimensions of military (mal)practice into dramatic relief.

For Sexton, the brutal excesses of My Lai were rendered disturbingly proximate by the nationality of the soldiers involved. In the opening lines of her poem, Sexton orientates the representation of the My Lai soldier and the sadistic dynamics of distant combat specifically towards the illumination of the more insidious, concealed forms of violence that underwrite gender relations at home.

I'm dreaming the My Lai soldier again
I'm dreaming the My Lai soldier night after night.
He rings the doorbell like the Fuller Brush Man
and wants to shake hands with me
and I do because it would be rude to say no
and I look at my hand and it is green with intestines.
And they won't come off,
they won't. He apologizes for this over and over.
The My Lai soldier lifts me up again and again
and lowers me down with the other dead women and babies
saying, *It's my job, It's my job.*

Through the imaginative repatriation of the My Lai soldier, Sexton localizes and domesticates the spectre of an excessive, previously remote, violence and gestures towards its inscription upon the gendered ideologies that govern private space. This reconfiguration of wartime brutality as personal threat is facilitated by the flexible verisimilitude of the dream mode, which legislates for Sexton's creative transposition of weaponry and decaying viscera into the supposed safety of the domestic sphere: as the protective architectural and geographical boundaries of home and country are decomposed, so the capacity of the home to grant asylum from the violent horrors of the outside, 'uncivilized' is unable to hold.

As is evident from the epithet that Sexton ascribes to him, the identity of the My Lai soldier is entirely incumbent upon his involvement in the perpetration of an international atrocity. At the same time, however, his savage personal history seems to be at odds with his neat suburban etiquette: he rings the doorbell, he shakes the speaker's hand, he apologizes profusely for soiling her with the bloody remains of his foreign victims. Superficially, then, he is dangerously indistinguishable from the average American guy – as encoded in the familiar and innocuous figure of the Fuller Brush Man.

As Kate Millett diagnoses the patriarchal condition as one in which cruelty and sexuality are awkwardly coexistent, so in Sexton's poem, the violence that inheres in the speaker's relationship with the soldier has strong erotic inflections. Experienced by the

speaker as a dream, the My Lai soldier is framed (albeit erroneously) as an object of desire. He is also, conversely, evoked within Sexton's repetitive phraseology as an insistent and unwelcome presence who comes to the speaker 'night after night,' apologizing to her 'over and over' as he covers her hands with the ineradicable gore of his victims. While these repetitions lend the poem a claustrophobic, nightmarish quality, they also function to establish the persistence of a male-perpetrated violence, which is ultimately, state-sanctioned ('it's my job, it's my job'). The relentlessness with which the My Lai soldier imposes himself upon the speaker is cast into tacitly sexual terms towards the end of this stanza, as he 'lifts' and 'lowers' the body of the speaker 'again and again'. Submitting to these repetitive manoeuvres, the speaker is placed alongside the deceased. Here, she arrives at an understanding of her own ultimate passivity, identifying herself with 'the *other* dead women and babies' [emphasis added].

The sexual dimensions of this encounter become increasingly explicit as the poem draws to its conclusion. Giving the speaker a 'bullet to swallow / like a sleeping tablet', the My Lai soldier 'stands on a stepladder' above the grave-pit of mothers and babies, 'pointing his red penis right at' the speaker 'and saying, / *Don't take this personally*'. For Sexton, however, it is already personal – war simply theatricalizes violences – or potential violences – that are already embedded in the structures of American culture. In this aggressively patriarchal context, the reaches of female agency are severely circumscribed. Faced with weapons and the threat of harm, the speaker is reduced to silence, and this silence comes to speak for all the dead women and babies by whom she is surrounded, and, by implication, for all those whose voices have been lost to history.

Conclusion

In one of Sexton's early poems, 'The Truth the Dead Know' (1962), the speaker – in the midst of a meditation on death, loss, and the strange rituals of mourning – makes a seemingly disjunctive observation. Having refused to join 'the stiff procession to the grave', she drives 'to the Cape. / . . . where the sun gutters from the sky, / where the sea swings in like an iron gate'. It is while the speaker is immersed in this landscape that her poignant ruminations – which have, up until this point, turned on events and experiences that are specific to her – take on a new and different resonance; here is where the speaker, absorbed in her private grief, begins to look beyond the horizons of the self in order to forge an imaginative connection between her own suffering and that of others, elsewhere, of whom she knows little: 'In another country', she remarks, 'people die'. In this flash of insight, the gap between the personal and the political closes: violence and devastation that takes place at a geographical remove is, all of a sudden, rendered proximate, and the speaker's bereavement is set within a much broader context of loss. I refer to 'The Truth the Dead Know' because it so neatly exemplifies the convergence of the personal and the political that I have attempted to identify over the course of the preceding chapters. For Sexton, as for other poets associated with the confessional movement, the route to the political is one that always, inevitably, traverses the zones of the personal. In other words, it is, invariably, the individual who stands at the sharp end of decisions about policy; it is he or she who loses loved ones to genocide, who fights in wars, who is tortured, raped, imprisoned, or disenfranchised, and it is he or she who bears witness to these events. This conviction is articulated by Sexton in the 1968 interview with Barbara

Kelves from which I have already quoted: it is only by 'find[ing] out who [we] are' as individuals, she explains, that we can start to 'confront national issues'. While, in the same interview, Sexton goes on to identify herself as a politicized individual – a 'pacifist' who 'sign[s] petitions' – she is careful to stress that she is 'not a polemicist'.[1] Certainly, where much of the work produced by Sexton's most noted female contemporaries – particularly Adrienne Rich, Denise Levertov, and Audre Lorde – was, in the highly charged cultural climate of the 1960s and early 70s, propelled by expressly political anxieties such as war, genocide, and institutional inequality, Sexton's poetry, as I have attempted to demonstrate over the course of this thesis, tends to engage with these types of anxieties in ways that are not always straightforward. In order to unravel some of the complexities of Sexton's approach, I have tried to show how her poetry not only describes the political at the level of content, but also inscribes its potentially traumatic effects at the level of form – both through the physical arrangement of the poem on the page and through various metrical strategies of repetition, disruption, and fragmentation.

If Sexton's literary responses to the defining crises of the twentieth century are characterized by the tendency to displace, theatricalize, reconfigure, efface, or personalize the 'truth' of these events – a tendency which has generated no small amount of debate about the suitability of such events to poetic fictionalization – then these responses also advertise the fact that they are doing so, and they thus serve as a potent reminder to the reader of the distortions that accompany any attempt to document, narrate, or aestheticize 'real' experience. Given that I have, in the preceding chapters, speculated about the putative truth value of the confessional

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[1] Barbara Kelves, Interview with Anne Sexton (1975), *No Evil Star: Selected Essays, Interviews, and Prose*, ed. by Steven E. Colburn (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1985), pp. 83-111 (p. 110).

statement and the nature of Sexton's critical legacy, I am, perhaps, obliged to reflect in these final paragraphs on the future of Sexton studies, and the direction they are likely to take in the years to come. While the primary objective of this thesis has been to reread Sexton's poetry through the lens of postwar American political culture – with special reference to the legacy of the Holocaust, the Cold War, the campaign for women's rights, and the conflict in Vietnam – the pursuit of this objective has not been straightforward. As I explained in the opening chapters, expanding the parameters of the debate about Sexton's work out towards the political necessarily entails some attempt to explicate the *absence* of politics from existing accounts of her writing. I have thus spent a considerable amount of space outlining the terms of Sexton's critical legacy – and, more pertinently, its psychobiographical dimensions – with a view to identifying the holes in the current scholarship and establishing the need for new, politicized approaches to the body of the writing. It is my hope that this thesis, alongside recent publications by Jo Gill and Philip McGowan, might contribute to a dynamic movement within the field of Sexton studies that takes issue with biographical methods of interpretation, and works to interrogate the legitimacy of the confessional epithet. This study, then, represents the beginning of an ongoing project to understand and evaluate the various ways in which Sexton's poetry negotiates the limits of time and space in order to redefine the relationship between the personal and the political. It is only by situating Sexton's treatment of the personal within an appropriate political context, after all, that the full scope of her confessional legacy – with all its complexities, ambivalences, and contradictions – can start to be meaningfully assessed.

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